

I love You LORD
for your mercy ne
faile me all my day I'll
hold in your hand from the moment
they're wake up until I lay
hands

P/E 9100

MABEL HAS MINK

Not many writers could rivet the reader's sympathetic attention so closely to a heroine over sixty.

But Ann Delamain does just that. Mabel, with a forcefulness and vitality years behind her age dominates the villagers and keeps her two sisters firmly up to the standards of "good" families in which all three had formerly been domestically employed. The story is concerned with Paddy Howland whom Mabel, in service with the Howland family, had practically brought up. He is the apple of her eye. For him she would—and did, make every sacrifice.

There is romance in plenty, for Paddy falls in love with and marries the wrong girl. Then, after her tragic death he finds his happiness with pretty, clever Tess, Mabel's niece.

The author has an observant eye and understands human nature. This, with her flair for revealing the thread of comedy underlying village life makes *Mabel Has Mink* amusing and refreshing reading.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Sammy Comes to Stay

Merry Widow's Waltz

Marry Me First

Miss Bennet Knows Best

Provoking

Lark Lady

Calicot Jam

The Best Butter

My Bee Stings

MABEL HAS MINK

by

ANN DELAMAIN

Publishers



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CHAPTER ONE

"'Tis stopped raining but I don't trust it. Give me the lend of your umbrella again, Doll; when mine'll be ready re-covered I'd be pleased to know and seems I'm not likely to. That young fellow at the shop had a lot too much tongue in his cheek, I thought so at the time. I said to him then . . ."

"It may rain but it's warm enough. You won't need your fur."

"That's all according. Anyways I'm wearing it. I might look in at the Vicarage. What's the matter with this step, Doll?"

"There shouldn't be nothing. Het scrubbed it yesterday."

"Yesterday isn't this morning. You tell Het she'd better do it again. I'd be ashamed for anyone to see the house like this."

"Is that Mabe talking? She'd better do the step herself. She did more demeaning than that when she . . ."

"That's enough from you, young Het. Well, now I'm off. Good-bye all. Shame about your windows, Doll, the rain has streaked 'em something cruel. And the first good drying day you and I'll have to do something about the curtains. Disgraceful, that's what the place looks. And I don't mind," the voice was lowered discreetly, "who hears me say so."

The front door of Number Seven, Bell Terrace, opened and an umbrella came out of it. A masterful hand unfurled the umbrella and it bloomed to bob in the doorway while the owner of the masterful hand continued to speak with extreme vigour against the voice rising in protest. The umbrella then shot forward and was followed by so tall a women that she had to stoop to come through the door. In her turn she was followed by two other women, equally tall but not quite so large. It was amazing that they could all come, unfolded, out of Number Seven, Bell Terrace. What was more, the second two stood together in the tiny porch while Mabel twirled the umbrella and lifted her skirt as she examined the path to the gate for signs of imperfect upkeep.

"Wants weeding again. If you two girls can't do nothing about it we'd best have little Tommy in from Three. I shan't be long but Het had better put those trotters on at once, and mind you look

over her, Doll; I don't fancy my dinner spoiled through carelessness. Good morning, Mrs. Horne."

"Good morning, Miss Barter."

The umbrella above Mabel's head twirled a complete circle. She was still in a fighting mood so her expression stiffened instead of softening but her shoulders quivered with satisfaction, a mare offered a lump of sugar might have made the same movement. Mrs. Horne was just Mrs. Horne but she never tried nothing on and she always showed respect, she knew Mabel was very different to everybody else in Bell Terrace, or for that matter, in Ringerton itself. And she admired her, too, a faint glitter of eye admitted that she considered Mabel, not only a cut above everybody else, but smart. That's right, decided Mabel, jealously fixing the glitter which might possibly have strayed behind her to Hetty and Doll, you don't catch me out in Doll's old raincoat or looking as if I'd been dragged through a hedge by my heels. I never step down into the village without I'm tidy and a bit more than that. This fur isn't my mink but it's a nice tie, comes up round the neck well. There isn't anybody else in Ringerton goes out of a morning in fur, and needn't wear their only one.

"How's your husband, Mrs. Horne?" she enquired graciously.

"Oh, he's all right. Gone to work as usual. Of course his rheumatics are just the same. Doctor says he doesn't know why he isn't a helpless cripple, there's plenty not half so bad as him as is."

"Just what dad used to say." Mabel spared a quick squint for one of the ribs of the umbrella, Doll would have to see to it. "And that was in the days when you had to pay the doctor yourself not get the Government to do it for you. Dad never held with the Government not even when it was Conservative. When all that free education came in he said it would be the ruin of the country and he was right."

"There's Mrs. Moody coming out of Three. I must ask her if her Tommy can tidy up our path a bit on Saturday morning. He's a good boy but saucy; still that's his mother's fault. Now, I've got to get along if I won't want to hear a lot of nonsense about everything in the shops being sold out."

Leaving Mrs. Horne shading her eyes with her hand to stare after her Mabel snapped the gate of Seven which looked like a toy gate as she dealt with it. Then, with the most assured walk in Ringerton, she went down the lane beyond, as she passed it inspecting Bell Terrace which was a row of small functional

wellings in the lee of the railway embankment and had, in Mabel's dad's day, housed only the bursting families of what was now known as the Dear Old Company's employees. Mabel was fond of stating that she was one to make allowances but no one remarking her eye flicking from cracked corner of window-pane to sagging porch would have guessed it. The umbrella bobbed severely and Mabel's light, official frown deepened. One of these days Bell (it was seldom allowed its full title) would have to be pulled up if it wasn't to Go Down. Everybody knew what that meant. The three Miss Barters who had been born in Seven couldn't, as they intended, lie there if it did. The umbrella bobbed violently as Mabel considered the excuses people made, and prepared to turn the corner of the lane and send her frown before her at the village of Ringerton.

"Good morning, Mabel."

"Oh, it's you, is it? Good morning, Stanley. Not at work?"

"Yes 'n' no, as you might say. The others is off on that Craven Combe job and I'm going down to the hut to get out some estimates. Busy days, eh?"

"Seems some folk find them so," snapped Mabel. If there was one person who always made her snap it was Stan Hawkins. Just like him not to make a sound and come up behind her like that. He had flounced round and seen that face of his and those blinking eyes, felt yet again the sour twinge of resentment that a fellow like Stan should stick a label on her. One of the Hawkinses staying single because of Mabel Barter. A fair insult nothing else. And Stan so bald he always kept his cap on in the house. Irritations, large and small, stabbed and pricked and turned Mabel's frown into a scowl. But Stan Hawkins didn't move. He'd as lief stop one of Mabel's scowls as have her shoulder turned on him. If ever there was an exasperating chap. 'Get out estimates.' The idea of him being good at sums. When the Hawkins family had suddenly collected itself and formed a little firm for plumbing and gas-fitting work, George—who seemed the only sensible one of the lot—said they could never do without Stan. Of all the rubbish, whenever the Hawkins van went out he was always left behind——

"There's one thing certain. If they're busy for you, they're busy for me. I haven't got no time to waste." Mabel's last snap might have acted like nut crackers on anyone but Stan Hawkins. He twirled herself and umbrella round again and started off furiously, with Stan, she knew, standing there, like a loon, blinking after her. And then, whistling impudence and doing his best to mash up his bicycle by twisting it from side to side instead of

going properly and making haste she saw the telegram boy. The telegram boy sucked in his round cheeks but restrained his whistle and rode straight at her.

"One f' you, Miss Barter."

"Give it over, please."

"Whaddya think I'm at?" enquired the telegram boy, who was a distant sprig of the Hawkins family, and had a sauce on which Mabel had often commented to Stan. But this morning she took no notice of it. All snap went out of her as she snatched the silly little envelope. Mabel hated telegrams. They made her forget herself. She stood now, staring at the envelope instead of opening it. People—the kind she had been accustomed to—opened telegrams at once but they always gave her a turn and then she obeyed her instinct. She managed to frown at the boy and then whisked round and, clutching the nasty thing in her hand, brushed past Stan and went back home. The gate of Number Seven, Bell, gave out an unusual little creaking yelp and Mabel was distracted for a minute by seeing Hetty and Doll amicably pottering together in the garden instead of getting on with all that needed doing inside the house. However, she couldn't stop to bother now.

"Girls!" she summoned them, sharply, a little breathlessly. "Here's a telegram I've got."

"For me?" asked Hetty, at once. That was young Het all over. A lot too quick about her own business, and nasty. No one like Het to know just how to get in a dig where you felt it most. And wasn't she always ready to show off? Just because she'd been in service with a title and all that money. And nobody could say Mr. Howland hadn't been rich. . . . Mabel jolted herself away from the tracing of the old scar and dealt with Hetty.

"Yes, you would fancy that, wouldn't you? No, not this time, Miss Grab-it-all. For me, and whoever 'tis had the sense to put 'Miss Barter' knowing I'm the eldest and won't stand no nonsense. Come into the house, Doll, while I get my glasses and see who it's from."

Hetty followed them, grumbling something about 'expecting' and deciding to let Mabe know that fur of hers was beginning to look very shabby at the back of the neck. Then she forgot everything in the excitement of an occasion. The three Miss Barters filled the tiny kitchen of which the ceiling seemed only an inch or two above their heads. Mabel dropped the telegram, Doll picked it up and at last it was opened.

"There now. It's from Paddy. I knew it would be."

Hetty and Doll exchanged glances. Doll coughed rather delicately behind her hand and then asked, formally:

"What does he say, Mabe?"

"Say?" Mabel searched the flimsy paper earnestly enough to tear it. "Says, 'May be along some time. How—er—are you. Paddy.'"

"Lettuce have a look?" suggested Doll, actually holding out her hand.

"You've heard all you need hear." Mabel frowned over the telegram again. Paddy shouldn't have put 'How's the girl'. All right for him to talk like that when they were together but he did ought to remember Het and Doll and the Ringerton Post Office.

"Doesn't seem to say when he's coming," observed Hetty, airily.

"No, and I'm glad of it. Don't want him rushing down here to me every time something Master Masterful doesn't like happens at the office." Mabel began to fold the telegram and a feeling like stitch caught hold of her inside her chest as she squeezed it. Three flies hurriedly left the ceiling as she drew herself to her full height and stood there, in the middle of the kitchen, a handsome woman, with a force and vitality twenty years behind her more than sixty, suspicious, swift and savagely tempered, fighting tart and now suddenly blooming with pride of love and tenderness. As a smile curved her full lips and her eyes went past them out of the window Hetty and Doll exchanged another look and a cross between a smirk and a grin. They knew their Mabe. She'd went into private service (ancient and modern mingled in the queer phrase) as a child kitchenmaid in the 'nineties. Stayed with the same family, the de Greys, until 1920 when the after-war bug bit her and she flounced off to leave place after place and then suddenly settle with a young married couple, the Howlands. Shown her sense, the Bartons all agreed for the de Greys once comfortable means could not compare with the successful Stock-Exchange standard set by the Howlands. There was money to spare and to splash in the black-and-chromium plated house in Wilton Crescent Mabe boasted about. Only Doll guessed what Mabe secretly felt. No real silver, not the right kind, no proper dressing for dinner, a cocktail bar leering its cost, good sofas and Chesterfields pushed out to make place for those low divans and even then cushions on the floor . . . language you had to get used to, nobody never surprised nor shocked at anything; whatever Mr. de Grey would have

said. . . . But it was easy to boast all the same. Those Howlands suited Mabe all right. Took her on motor trips, week-ends and visits to friends in the country—Mabe never went into details about those visits but did she open her mouth about the times she stayed at the smartest hotels? And one Christmas they took her to St. Moritz. That was the peak, it was also the starting point of Mabel's biggest but most delicate triumph for in the following October Paddy was born. Mabel took Paddy over almost at once.

Mrs. Howland came back from the nursing home in a nervy state and showed a funny side of herself, wanting to carry on as if she hadn't got a baby to look after, just play around with ukeleles, cocktails, men friends, same as ever. Mabel seized her opportunity. She soon disposed of the Nanny Mrs. Howland had engaged and announced that she'd look after Paddy herself for a time. What could one say to such generosity? Mr. Howland, who was riding the top of the boom on the Stock Exchange rewarded it suitably and Mrs. Howland turned to the telephone, told everybody how marvellous Mabel was and dated herself right and left, possibly chiefly left. That was Mabel's suspicion for from now on she and Mrs. Howland were due to be rivals for Paddy. Not that there was never no fear of that for Paddy was Mabel's boy from his first napkining on her lap. She adored him with a strength and ferocity which extorted an appropriate return. She managed him entirely, organized his nursery, agreed his first little school, let its head-mistress know what she thought of a class room fit to give a child its death o' cold, took him away by herself after chicken pox and measles, cried her eyes out when he went to his prep. school, accompanied him to the best seats at theatres, cricket, and every blessed one of the big football matches in the holidays. Mr. Howland paid and grinned and said "Carry on," to everything and Mrs. Howland never made any trouble at all. She hadn't been quite right ever since Paddy's birth, and then, when Paddy was ten, what did she take it into her head to do but try for another? Mabel could have told her (in fact did) not to be so silly, however, by that time the mischief was three months done. Mabel was furious. A new baby was coming now just when Paddy needed all the attention and not his nose put out of joint. And Mr. Howland on whom she had always believed she could rely, saying he wanted a girl.

Well, he got his girl and a packet of trouble with her. The poor little thing only lived three days and Mrs. Howland never really recovered, and died just falling over the dinner table, luckily when

Paddy wasn't at it, two years later. After Mrs. Howland's death Mabel had the time of her life. She took on the entire management of the Wilton Crescent house, bossed it as the poor soul (Mrs. Howland, now forgiven) had never done. Bossed Paddy, of course, and his father, quarrelled magnificently with the staff, scattered pieces of her mind like confetti on a triumphal progress, used the telephone or, when it failed, her remarkable presence to cow the big smart stores or even smarter small shops where she condescended to buy the best of everything. And then the time of her life was succeeded by the shock of her life. The very day before Paddy was due to start his first term at Harrow, Mr. Howland, lighting a cigarette in the hall, staggered against the wall and slid down it. Lay crumpled on the floor, dead, the same as his wife. It was the end of everything. Mrs. Howland's brother whom Mabel had never liked was left as Paddy's trustee. He made all the arrangements, sold the house and the furniture, took Paddy off to live with them in his holidays. Paddy, the poor, dear little fellow, was dazed, naturally, and didn't realize what it was all going to mean. There wasn't a great deal of money left, only just about enough to pay for Paddy at Harrow and Oxford, where he never went because war broke out and of course he joined up and when he came back one of his father's partners took him into their firm on the Stock Exchange. He had promised to send for Mabel as soon as he came home. Down at Ringerton she waited for the call, but by the time Paddy was demobbed the whole world had changed. Young men with very little money could no longer provide an establishment for an expensively-minded maid. Paddy shared a flat off the Edgware Road with two pals——

"He 'as got to give his mind to his work," stated Mabel, conscious enough of those two girls gawking at each other to make her voice firm. "I can't do nothing to help him, not till he's properly settled, so I've told him over and over. 'Paddy,' I've said, 'it's up to you, 'n' you've got to realize, sonny . . .'"

"He's realizing, safe enough. Having a high old time doing it, too, I shouldn't wonder." Hetty sounded not only nasty, but really rude. "Settled, my eye, Mabe. If all we hear's true, London's livelier now for some people than 'twas in our day. Like as not Paddy and those chaps he lives with is playing fine games, going one better than his father 'n' mother ever did and we all know what they were once. Many a time I've heard Sir Edward pass the remark that he'd seen Johnny Howland and . . ."

"And that's a lot more than enough from you, Henrietta.

Paddy's the boy he always was, the best in the world, the most lovin', the last one to be neglectful and get doing what he shouldn't." Mabel's voice trembled with passion and the pain of real hurt. Doll tried to signal Hetty and began to sidle towards Mabel. Mabel in a real upset which involved not only her temper but her feelings was more than either she or Het cared to provoke.

"That's right," she suggested quickly, before Mabel could start on Het for what she'd said about Mr. Howland which would certainly come next. "Paddy's a nice young fellow and if he likes his bit of fun, why shouldn't he have it? I'm sure the rest of 'em do, see what goes on here Saturday nights and they call it playing darts at the Ring of Bells. After fighting for his country and all, not but what of course he'd have had to go along with the others. And if he wants anything he'll send more than a telegram, I'll warrant. Mabel'll be sorry she ever . . . whatever's that? Sounds like a car stopping."

"And I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't. I've been expecting no less all the morning."

Mabel and Doll stared at Hetty with the same fury. If she wasn't one who could always cap everything. That smirk on her face told them she had it up her sleeve and just waited, never saying. Letter she must have got and hid. Talk about sly. The three Miss Barters, all quivering, surveyed each other. Then, led by Hetty, they filed superbly through the house and down the path to the gate at which stood a big Daimler drawing one or more heads to bob in every window of Bell Terrace. In the driver's seat where the chauffeur should have been was a smart, handsome woman, apparently about thirty-five and, rootling at the back among the half-wrapped bare-necessity packages of this raw age of two hoots for all delicacy was a pretty, golden-haired girl whose rear view triumphed over her slacks.

"Oh, hello, Barter!" the handsome woman smiled and raised a hand to greet Hetty.

Hetty bridled. She had always been able to and it was just as aggravating to watch as ever. Their mother had said she was born unfortunate, then how was it she'd always managed to step out into luck's way? Getting that place with Sir Edward and Lady Dering, Belgrave Square, might have been Buckingham Palace the way Het went on. Of course the Derings had all that money, no denying it, or that they were Real Society like the de Greys would have been if they'd had the money, too. Still there was a difference, it was these modern ways—Mabel's glower of respect

and jealousy lightened as she told herself that she alone appreciated the difference. And now Sir Edward had died sudden—not so sudden as Mr. Howland—leaving Death Duties and that great house near Craven Combe he had bought when the Government took over Belgrave Square. Lady D. and the girls weren't going to be all that rich any more as she had several times pointed out to Het.

"How are you, madam?" she asked, her voice warm with consideration.

"Very well, thanks, Mabel," said Lady Dering, drawing off her driving gloves and pushing them into the map cubby. Looking ever so smart as usual, that big soft grey check suit and top coat to match suited her splendid and so did the perky little grey felt hat with the black quill caught by a plain brilliant bar—real diamonds, Het would say, and, drat her, she'd most likely be right.

"And how's Miss Camilla?"

"Fine, thank you, Mabel," chanted the golden-haired girl, a boy's grin glinting between long black lashes which weren't all mascara. She smacked her hands free of the grubbiness of the packages and jumped out of the car at the same moment as her mother. The two doors slammed together and Camilla followed Lady Dering round the bonnet of the car to Seven, Bell's gate.

"May we come in for a minute, Barter? I'm over to get the meat and fetch that Mrs. Riggs to do some cleaning for me. No, of course we haven't heard of anyone to live in. A half-wit girl comes from the village and sometimes she brings her sister who is worse still. Thank God we've got a gardener. Camilla is going to work under him then she won't be conscripted and sent to make buttons at Brigg or something."

"That's good. Cold quite gone, Camilla?"

Mabel stiffened again. If there was one thing she couldn't abide it was this newfangled way of leaving out 'Miss' or 'Master' in addressing the children of A Family. Of course she had adopted it herself, what was more she generally used it pointedly, but that made no difference to Feelings. One thing led to another, if you treated the children on a level they took on a manner of speaking to you which Mabel could only describe as Too Friendly, and there was something wrong about being asked if you'd be frantically-good-and- instead of given a straight, quiet order. Truth was nowadays nobody never knew where they were with nobody, Mabel summed up and stepped aside, in the old, elegant de Grey

drawing-room manner to allow Lady Dering and her daughter to pass her on the narrow path.

"How beautifully you have dug your garden. It looks ready for anything. Ours at Combe Court is terrible. I'm so frightened the gardener will give notice and then I shall have to take Jane and Gay away from school to work under Camilla. Perhaps I shall have to anyway, the Court is an impossible place to keep up. I'm going to Town soon to see my trustees."

"It's an anxiety for you, isn't it, madam?" enquired Hetty, as loud as she could because Mrs. Horne, not content with bobbing at a window, had boldly come out of her front door.

"It is," agreed Lady Dering, dryly. "As a matter of fact I'm probably going to turn the house into flats. My sister-in-law wants one and she's a saint, I shall adore to have her. And Lord Richard Fitton wants another. You remember him, Barter, dining with us in Belgrave Square? He looks just the same as ever, only the war has turned his hair white, it used to be the colour of Camilla's and exquisitely scented, he always used Cherio Six, I believe, but he's a darling in a house, so handy and cheerful his cousins who took him in when he was bombed tell me. Oh, you've distempered your nice sitting-room again."

Lady Dering walked past Hetty into it and looked round her approvingly but with a certain coolness and nonchalance which Mabel recognized as characteristics that had given her the whip-hand of Het and Het's temper in the Belgrave Square days. Het needn't pretend she'd had it all her own way.

"Not bad 'm, is it?" she enquired, before Het could take all the credit for what Doll had done. "Not for a little place, in a way of speaking."

"It's superish. Oh, Mummy, do let me try on the small drawing-room at Combe. I know I could do it. Barter would advise me, wouldn't you, Barter?"

"No, darling, you'd only keep your mouth open and swallow pints of the stuff, then you'd develop some strange disease that would mean terrible specialists fees, and I simply can't afford them." Lady Dering gazed thoughtfully at her golden daughter and repressed what Mabel's sharp ear noted as a queer bitter little sigh, not what you'd expect of Lady Dering at all. Camilla giggled, and they all turned to look at her. Well, there was no pretending she wasn't a pretty girl with that hair smooth as silk over her head and hanging to dapple her shoulders, eyes that ought to have been blue but were an odd light green encouraged to be still odder

and greener by the mascara. Her lipstick made her mouth look as if it ought to have a notice 'Wet Paint' chalked over it, and why ever, with those high cheekbones put rouge right on them—still he'd got her beauty, her father's really, he'd been fair, Lady Dering was dark, hair, eyes and rose-suntan skin. Mabel, who wasn't one to care for girls or admire other women, suddenly decided that Camilla was all right and Lady Dering a lot better than Het let on. Shame about them always having been waited on hand 'n' foot and now obliged to help themselves like everybody else.

"You'll be wanting Henrietta to come over to you for a couple-days to clean the silver, I expect, 'm?" she shot in before Camilla had stopped giggling. That 'ud learn young Het who knew the request was coming and was going to play it, saying this and that and could she, coy as a kitten.

"Yes, as a matter of fact that is what I came to see Barter about," stated Lady Dering, very coolly indeed. "I know it's difficult for her to arrange to leave home but any time she can manage will suit me. What about the week after next, Barter? I'll drive over and fetch you."

"That's as pleases yourself, madam. Next week could be made convenient to me provided all's well. We was going down to our nephew, Dick's, for a little visit but it's been put off till towards the end of the month."

"Next week will be splendid. I'm afraid you'll find the silver has turned into brass. And all the green baize covers have got the moth. I must have new ones made. You will tell me what you think about them. There's such a lot to do in the country, it's much worse than town, I get quite worn out. Camilla darling, don't start smoking."

"That's quite all right, 'm, but if you'd rather she didn't in here I'll take her out in the garden, then you and Henrietta can have a little chat together with no interruptions. Come along, Camilla." Without waiting for Camilla, Mabel flounced out, leaving her words hot behind her. If Lady D. wanted Het to herself she was welcome to her. Pity Het couldn't take it into her head to go and stay at Combe Court altogether, give Mabel and Doll a little peace from her everlasting picking. Lady D. might be a nice enough woman but she didn't always show her sense. And what Het 'ud be like after she'd gone . . .

"I say, Mabel, it was absolutely super of you to suggest coming out here."

Mabel, whose temper was still at the sizzling suspicious stage,

inspected Camilla sharply. That paint was enough to put anyone off, she decided, sourly, and also how shocking silly a girl looked in slacks. Then she caught sight of Mrs. Horne and Mrs. Moody, down along Bell, talking. Instinct and experience told Mabel that they were discussing the Derings, their car, their appearance and their reputation with respect, tinged possibly with awe. Her temper veered suddenly, with positive violence, a smirk replaced her glower and she accepted one of Camilla's cigarettes out of a smart three-gold-barred case.

"Thank you, dear, I don't mind if I do. Got your lighter, or shall I fetch a box of matches? Oh, one to match the case. Lucky girl, present I suppose? Your Dad's last? That was a sad thing. I felt it for you all, you'll never get over the miss of him, will you? Your mummy won't never find nothing the same again, poor soul. What's the matter?"

"I must move the car, oughtn't to have parked it to block the gate, there's someone else drawing up."

"Another car?" Satisfaction came from Mabel in sparks, and then the smugness of her expression was lost in a glowing blankness, incredulity, blazing to passionate recognition, delight.

"Why, if it isn't—'tis—Paddy! Oh, my darling boy!"

She spread out her arms, dropping her cigarette and pushing Camilla aside as she fairly flew, like a great excited mother-bird, down the path to the gate which Paddy was opening. Paddy and the gate too seemed to be swallowed in her vast embrace.

"The last thing I was ever thinking. My precious. That telegram, now why ever didn't you say in it——? You'd not ought to be playing that sort of joke on me, Paddy. How was I to guess?"

"Half a minute, lemme get through this. Didn't you see I'd sent the telegram from Barleigh? I'm down with Hugh MacAlistair, he's seeing a client at Barleigh Manor and let me have the car to run over here while they are talking. Can't stay above ten minutes. Good old Bartie it's great to tap you. I meant to do it but I had to be a shade wary. Hugh's a good type but he can be quite a funny fellow if he smells anyone taking him for granted. We were in the post office together and I figured the girl would read out the message. I say, I'm sorry . . ."

"Sorry, I'm sure. You don't know Camilla, do you, Paddy? Miss Dering, Captain Howland. Bless the boy, he's growed again or 'tis so long since I've seed him. Pick up that cigarette for me, will you, my dear?"

Mabel took the cigarette from Paddy and tossed her head. In secret she suffered one of the tiny quakes which had attacked her ever since Paddy grew out of babyhood after she had shown off her power over him. A flash of uncomfortable memory showed her his face at a big football match when she had teased him about a scarf, at his prep. school sports when she had spoken too loudly of 'unfair' after he had been beaten at the high jump. She knew quite well that he would hate her calling attention to his appearance in front of Camilla. There was nothing she didn't know about her own boy. She allowed her emotions to swamp her. Standing there, tall and straight, not handsome, maybe, but good-looking, fit to melt you. Hair gone darker—or was that brilliantine?—hazel eyes that didn't look too round now, the same little nut of a nose and that small scar beside an eyebrow he'd got from a fall on an open penknife those Easter holidays. She'd told him he'd always carry the mark and she'd been right; never been wrong about Paddy. The delicious sensation of swelling with love and pride was irresistible, she gave herself up to it, and was, for a moment, blind and deaf to everything else. Then back she came with a clap to see Paddy grinning at Camilla, Camilla quirking a corner of that mouth of hers at him.

"H'm. Anyone 'ud say you two'd met before." This time she could have slapped herself. A downright dolt she was to pass a remark like that and sort of push Camilla at him. But there it was, she couldn't seem to help it, whenever Paddy worried her over the least thing she just had to speak out, it had always been the same. Breathing fast in the familiar way she moved a step forward to stand between them. But somehow she didn't arrive between them, Paddy had moved . . . he was talking in that nice way of his to Camilla, getting at everything.

"Living down here? I say, how d'you manage about petrol? You used to be in Town, didn't you? I've heard Bartie talk about your people, and I believe they used to know mine. Sometime in the gaydog days before the war. What d'you do? Hey! Is that called being on the land? Wish I was sometimes. Yes, the Stock Exchange and it's about as lively as a bankrupt mortuary these times. Do you ever come up to Town?"

"Camilla's going to work hard. Her Mummy's relying on her to help keep Combe Court nice. Don't you go trying to distract her. And you've got to think of your own job, not playing round." The words tumbled out of Mabel's mouth, she didn't try to stop them, she felt queer and desperate.

"Hold it, Bartie, I'm a big boy now, at least some people think so. Was Bartie's Hetty your nurse too, Camilla?"

"No, indeed. There was two in Camilla's nursery for the three girls, and a between-maid as well to do the carrying up and down and help clean the nursery floor. Henrietta never . . ."

"No, but she was marvellous. I remember her ticking Nannie off, they had glorious rows over prams in the hall."

"You'd oughtn't to say that, Camilla. I'm sure Henrietta was ever so fond of you and Jane and little Gay."

"Rather. I said she was marvellous."

Mabel fairly gulped. It had been her last shot, a desperate attempt to deflate youth by reproaching it. Now she was helpless, tears pricking behind her eyes and in her nose like pepper and those two jabbering away, not taking no notice of her any longer. Camilla was that sort of girl, hadn't the proper feelings. What Miss and Master de Grey would have said to her . . .

"Hullo, here's Mummy coming out. Mummy, you don't actually know Paddy Howland, do you? He is just driving back to Town. He says will I go with him, or would I if it wasn't for Hugh MacAlister because it's his car."

"Darling, I can't spare your rations. Hullo, Paddy? Yes, of course I practically know you. You must come and stay with us at Combe sometime. There's a hard tennis court but if it doesn't get any attention it will soon go soft. Do you shoot, I mean, now it's only birds or someone by mistake? If we're not turned into flats we'll love to have you. Well, Barter, I shall look forward to next week. Oh, and I brought you six eggs. Camilla, get them, will you?"

"I'll help you break 'em, Camilla."

Mabel drew back and watched all the fuss. Paddy running after Camilla, both of them sticking down there between the two cars, just making the excuse to be together. Lady Dering going on about the beautifully-dug garden, Het smiling in that maddening way because Paddy had blown her a kiss, the same as he did Doll and it was a wonder he hadn't sent Mrs. Horne and Mrs. Moody a couple too, Paddy was a lot too easy. Still he had come, no need for Het to hand out any more of her nasty hints. Come, and was going again. "Oh, Paddy, love," whispered Mabel, under cover of all the racket. It was like being pulled in half to feel like she was losing him and at the same time have to keep a sharp eye and ear on the rest. What was Lady Dering muttering like that to Het for? Was Doll near enough to hear, would she tell or just show off

like she could sometimes? Was Paddy laughing about them with Camilla? It wasn't like Paddy, but when a young man got with a girl there was no knowing. How old was Paddy, twenty-three? Dear life, that gave you a turn. She braced herself to come forward into the picture again.

"Good-bye 'm, and thank you for the eggs, I'm sure. I hope you won't have no trouble with your trustees. We'll be anxious to hear from Henrietta. Yes, looks like rain again, don't it, but you may get home in the dry. Good-bye, Camilla."

Slacks and all, she was in the car at last, lucky the girl hadn't got a real behind. Mabel repressed other reflections, the effort reddened her cheeks and made her ears turn slightly mauve and tingle. The big Daimler started and swung off, now she could turn and demand a few minutes of Paddy.

Paddy, bless his heart, demonstrated that he was just the same as ever. He came over and stood with his arm round her, gave her a great kiss (she could have done with less of a smack to it) and said "How's the girl?" just as Mrs. Horne came out of her gate.

"I like your sauce," protested Mabel, but her heart was completely melted within her and the bliss of those attentions made her eyes swim. For all that she inspected Paddy sharply, inquired about the state of his underlinen, insisted on a promise to send a parcel of his worst socks to be mended, hinted that she might have two-three coupons she could spare.

"I like your sport," retorted Paddy, and she had to hug him while the tears bothered her.

"Now you'll come again? No nonsense, Paddy-boy?"

"Did you ever stand for any nonsense?"

"Glad you remember it. I wish I could give you a drink, dear, but I tell you what I can manage, a packet of chocolate."

"I'd love it." Nobody never had quite Paddy's quick, sweet way of appreciating a favour. "Look here, I must be tootling."

"You want to get off, of course." Mabel tossed her head. Het was watching and grinning but she didn't care. "All right, I'm not keeping you."

"No one else could, Bartie."

What did the boy mean by that? The words and the funny look that went past her haunted Mabel as she stood waving after the car, when it had vanished.

"Well," announced Doll. "We have had a morning."

"Bit of luck for Paddy, him meeting Camilla like that," stated Hetty, her eyes sliding sideways at Mabel. Mabel's tongue stung

with a retort but she kept it back and merely glared at Het, while she suddenly faced and acknowledged an obvious truth. Paddy had got to get married one of these days, she'd be the last to wish it otherwise. The Derings were nice people as nice people went in these times. Camilla wasn't fit to hold a candle to Paddy—or rather an electric torch while he tinkered with a car or the radio. But she might do. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

IT was always the same when they were going away, the three of them together. Something happened in the house, like a tap started leaking, or a fall of soot down the chimney, or the rain coming in at that corner of the scullery where it always did. Het was always at her most aggravating and Doll started one of her headaches. It was a wonder, time and again, that Mabel didn't carry out her threat of stopping home after all. But of course when they were going to young Dick's she couldn't miss seeing him and Jean and little Tessa and the boys. Family feeling triumphed but only just and breakfast at Seven, Bell, fairly turned before it reached the stomach. This morning Mabel, coming down last because she'd had to unpack her little case again, was greeted by Doll, hand to head, informing her that she'd had a card from Pensions at Tolbury to say their man would be calling. "And he can call," snorted Mabel, brushing past Doll who could be almost as aggravating as Het when she liked. "If he doesn't find anyone at home he can go away again, can't he? Pensions is Government and Government doesn't mind wasting time 'n' money, let alone petrol. 'Oo was that card addressed to, young Doll? Should've come to me."

"My head's too bad for me to bother about who it's addressed to," grumbled Doll miserably. "But there's another letter for you, Het says. She took it in."

"I'll warrant she did, and smelt the envelope till her nose neared the flap up too. Never knew such a house for prying where it's no concern of anybody's. Give me my letter, please, Het, and don't you trouble yourself about nothing more to do with it." Mabel snatched the letter and flounced down in her chair. London,

W.I. postmark, typewritten envelope, why ever did Paddy want to type when he'd got that nice stylo his uncle had given him for his birthday? Typewriting was nothing, the postman 'ud think no more of it than what he'd see on the Pensions card. Letter inside the same too, oh, she'd have to speak to him again.

My dear Bartie,

I thought I might be down at Barleigh Manor this week-end but things happened. Now there isn't a chance of it, this is to tell you the big news. I'm going to be married. Her name's Mary Percival Dennis, as a matter of fact really Hallam but she took her maiden name again. Her first husband was killed flying before they had been married three weeks, and she has worked extraordinarily hard and is now tops at her job, advertising. You must come up for the wedding which will be pretty quiet, of course. I'll let you know details soon. I really wanted to tell you that day I buzzed over in Hugh's car but what with the reception you were giving and so on, knocked it back. We haven't any plans, probably live in Percy's flat at first. How's the girl?

Love from Paddy.

Mabel, on account of education before it was free, was a slow cautious reader. Never before had words on paper flashed under her eyes. Never before had the meaning of words broken like a whiplash.

"Well!" she gasped, and looked up at those two goggling at her. Almost choking with the effort she swallowed the froth of her feelings. Straight across the breakfast table she let them have it. "You'll have to know some time, so may as well be now. Paddy's engaged to be married."

"I never?" bridled Het, nasty as anything.

"Did you ever?" demanded Doll, bumping down the teapot.

The goggling turned to a glare, greedy with interest. Marriage meant a wedding, a wedding *was* a wedding, nobody could get away from it. "And I'd like me tea, if it's all the same to you, young Doll, before it's stone cold from no cosy put back. Lor', I shall have to be thinking about my best costume doing up and a new hat, that's no coupons anyway, thank goodness. Lucky I've got that posh bag Mr. Howland gave me after Paddy's scarlet fever. And my mink. Look what you're doing, Doll, slopping all that milk into my cup." Goaded by the girls' glares Mabel got as far as that then she could do no more. Snatching her cup from Doll she rose from the table and informed it:

"I'll go upstairs with this. Haven't finished with that case of

mine, and I'll be glad to read over Paddy's letter in peace 'n' quiet. Yes, of course I knowed what was coming, Paddy'd never keep nothing from his Bartie, but he did give me to understand that he'd not be announcing yet on account of not enough money to get married for a year or so. That uncle of his must have helped him, or the firm, it being his father's friends. Dear little chap, I can't believe—now neither of you two need come after me."

The case, possibly registering the excitement of the house, had sprung open again and dealing with it, finding her tea stone-cold, shouting down to Doll for a fresh cup, giving Doll a word that wouldn't do her no harm and getting ready in a hurry kept thought at bay, until they were fairly in the train, with Het and Doll letting other occupants of the carriage have the benefit of their views on the difference between all this talk of the Government pretending it wasn't them owning the railways and the Dear Old Company that knew what it was doing like a pack of upstarts couldn't. Settled in her corner seat (it was seldom that a Miss Barter travelled on Dad's line and didn't get one, if they were all together Mabel always took it) Mabel slipped Paddy's letter in and out of her bag. She hadn't any more need to read it, fair printed on the air in front of her eyes it was. Paddy not saying a word before writing just like he'd write to anybody. Paddy, marrying a widow, one as had gone back to her old name. What would a decently-married woman want to do that for? 'Tops at her job.' 'Advertising'—that sounded likely enough, anyway. Got a flat and Paddy didn't seem to mind living in it—living on her? Mabel snapped her bag and glowered out of the window, her lips twitching. Everyday life being what it was she seldom confronted the sort of issue one would pray about in church. But now she was brought up against something she didn't like at all. You couldn't say it was exactly wrong for Paddy to take it as a matter of course that his wife would as good as keep him but it wasn't how she'd brought the dear child up. Wilton Crescent had been easy, a bit too easy, she'd always known that and she had taken a lot of trouble to make Paddy understand things his parents never mentioned to him. Prayers night and morning, children's services when it wasn't weather for the gardens on Sunday afternoons. But of course he had been taken away from her, snatched you might say and then there was the war. Mabel was honest, she could only deceive herself up to a point and a point with her was the prick of obstinate unselfish love. For all she had tried to do Paddy mightn't have the principle. And he'd shrunk from telling her about his engagement,

there was no getting away from that. At least he had asked her up for the wedding, but upon her word——

"Pull up the window your end, will you, Doll? The smuts are coming in something awful, Government'll need to start swimming pools on the platforms to keep the passengers clean. Right up, my girl. I'm sure no one in the carriage has any objection. Stopping again, that's their progress for you. Thank you, I'm sure I haven't had time to look at the paper this morning, but nothing in it as usual, I suppose."

A mild man proffered Mabel the *Daily Mail* and for the rest of the journey she used it to express her feelings shaking, fairly rattling the thin newsprint, demanding "What's this?" and scowling at headlines she couldn't really see because Paddy's letter got between them and her eyes. The train stopped as for sixty years it had always stopped, just outside Templeford Junction and this time Mabel nearly exploded, poked the *Daily Mail* practically into its loaner's eye and blocked the carriage door looking out for a proper platform reception from her family.

"Jean isn't there. Dick and Tessa's come but I don't see the boys. If you could reach me down my case and the parcel without dropping it, Doll, I'd be obliged." Expertly, as an experienced traveller, Mabel swung the door back and just as the train stopped, stepped down into the embrace of a big, grizzled-from-fair man, her nephew who had been the first passion of her life when his young parents died and left him to her care.

"Dicky! Bless the boy. Well, young Tess?"

"Hullo, Auntie?"

A busy junction platform is not the ideal place for a sharp inspection of anybody but Mabel managed to look over young Tess. Dick's only daughter, her great niece, and as nice a looking girl of seventeen as you would find anywhere. All Mabel's sentimentality was reserved for what the family summed up simply as 'trousers'. With girls, even with Tess of whom she was genuinely fond and certainly proud, she had permanent reservations and never sheathed criticism. But this suspicious attitude was flanked by a penetrating appreciation of her own sex. She grudged it beauty, charm and style but she knew only too well when they were there. Tart satisfaction brightened her eyes as she noted the way Tess carried herself, how nice her complexion was now, and that nobody need say her golden-brown hair and eyes just the same were ordinary. Her voice was nice too, and Jean had been to her manners, the child could behave herself anywhere.

Not unlike what I was at her age, decided Mabel and gave Tess a good sound kiss before kissing Dick again the second before Het thought she would.

"We walking, lad, or have you got us a taxi?" she inquired. It appeared that Dick, who was a lorry driver, had managed to get the loan of a van which was nearly a small bus.

"Anybody'd say we was a school treat," sniffed Mabel, prepared as usual with Dick and his family to let nothing get past her. "Still, I suppose——"

"Come along, Auntie," invited Tess, turning from Het and Doll.

"Come along to you, Miss," snapped Mabel, smiling rather sourly as Tess flushed. Then she took her arm and squeezed it. Tess didn't mean no impudence, it was just a way she'd got into from bossing her dad and mum like she did, the young monkey. They thought the world of her, with her Higher than School Certificate and this job in the Ministry of Route Reconstruction, Western Regional, H.g., which was webbing and honeycombing the spreading town of Templeford. "We'll go together and let the others come on after. Dad'll take my case, won't you, Dick? I can manage the parcel."

"Of course I'll carry your parcel, Auntie."

"Very well, please yourself." Mabel realized that it was going to be rather difficult not to speak sharp to everybody, and winced, wondering how she was going to stand family comments on Paddy's engagement. Het would certainly manage to give the talk of it some nasty turn.

"Let's go on and get front seats in the van. We'll be passing my offices in High Street, South, I'll show you. I was given this Saturday morning off because I told Miss Maynard I wanted to meet my auntie. Miss Maynard is from Tolbury, she's ever so nice, recommending me for one of our three candidates for a course in London in May."

"Well, now, did you ever?" Mabel eyed Tess sideways. She couldn't help feeling suspicious of anyone to-day and it was a pity just at that moment a young porter whistled past them and grinned at Tess. Tess acknowledged the grin with a smart, distant little bow. The girl was a cool hand already, no doubt of it, the boy (Mabel could always see through the back of her head) was gaping round at her, and of course she knew it. The little jolt of jealousy passed like a match blown out and like another match struck Mabel warmed towards Tess who had wanted to meet her and was certainly doing the family proud.

"Friend of yours, girlie?" she asked, amiably.

"I meet him at the Youth Club. He attends the You and Me and Democracy lectures, and he's ever so good at tennis."

"You tell him from me he'd better keep his mind on his work. Democracy's all very well for them that can afford it and what your great grand-dad would have said to a Templeford platform lad fancying himself at tennis, I don't know. Things were very different when people knew their own stations in life, and I hope as you'll do better than just a porter when you come to think of marrying, Tess."

Mabel felt more like herself after letting off steam like that and was almost her own woman again when the van arrived at Number fifty-six Beechcroft Avenue, a long tendril of the rank red-brick growth which had started its despoiling sprawl round Templeford in the decade before the War. She was equal to tackling Dick's Jean, a good enough wife to him but never the one Mabel would have chosen, and could make it clear to the three small boys that Auntie Mabel was a much more important person than Aunties Het and Doll.

The visit started off quite nicely with a good dinner, Jean not being a bad cook, Mabel taking Dick's place and spooning the vegetables on to the plates. Nobody could serve like Mabel, although she had to hint it herself. Tess picked her up quickly.

"There's no one like Auntie Mabel." The young woman was getting very nippy, no doubt of it. Did she mean all she said? That calm and the way she could quell her little brothers with a glance made you wonder. However at a Barter family dinner there was not much time for wondering and Mabel soon slipped down from her superior attitude to join in the fray of news, comment and criticism of absent Barters, always a cause of suspicion to any number of them gathered together. Letters might give the impression that they were getting on as usual but how was one to know that they weren't keeping it dark about having stepped into luck's way? Family pride and congenital jealousy spiced the dinner at fifty-six Beechcroft Avenue, and after it the day passed pleasantly with Mabel laying down the law in the sitting-room to Dick, Het trying to do the same thing in the kitchen to Jean and Doll playing games like a great baby out in the garden with the children. At night they all retired to an incredibly small number of bedrooms. In the familiar friendly way everybody slept with everybody else and Mabel, her dignity unimpaired, passed

an excellent night with Doll on one side of her and Tess on the other. She never roused till dawn when she had a bad dream about Paddy. The dream 'came out' at breakfast when Het (trust her!) brought up the subject of his engagement.

"And I was only the other day passing the remark to Mabe what a pity Lady Dering's Camilla couldn't fancy him. They met at our place, you remember I told you, Jean, and it looked they was getting on quite well but I suppose this affair was going on all the time. Unfortunate, I call it."

"You'd call picking up a pound note in the gutter unfortunate," growled Mabel, upset, and unable to find a better retort. She went on feeling upset because Het, with the backing of an audience, turned shocking nasty, naming no names and making her meaning clearer than if she had spelled them out. Of course the Howlands had been among the Bright Young People, once it was the fashion to admire that set, now it wasn't and that was all needed to be said. Mabel turned a red that darkened to a dull mauve, drew in her lip under her uppers and fidgeted. Het, of course, kept on until Mabel announced that it was Sunday, although no one seemed to notice it, and she for one was going to church, with young Tess, she hoped.

Church restored her to a certain extent, the trouble was that it gave her too good an opportunity to worry in peace about Paddy. In the afternoon she found she couldn't sit still and invited Tess for a walk. She felt pretty sure Tess had other plans but gave her no more chance than she had in the morning. They went to a sort of park at which Mabel sniffed contempt but round which she walked Tess three times while she talked to her of Paddy, trying to give the impression that he was about to do all those things that once she had dreamed he might.

"You needn't bother making excuses for him to me, Auntie, I'm sure I think he sounds ever so nice and if he's in love with his young lady he'd ought to marry her, didn't he? Ever so sad her losing her first husband flying, and she must be all right if she has waited to marry Paddy, lots don't, there's no end to the tales you hear, isn't there? I guess you'll feel better about it when you've actually seen them married."

Struck all of a heap Mabel walked faster than ever. Tess kept up with her indulgently, and a glance at the girl's profile decided Mabel not to tell her off as for a few moments she burned to do. To think of a chit like that seeing straight through the screen she had put up to shield herself. Talking as if she had all the

experience in the world too. Maybe somebody ought to drop a word of warning to Dick, no knowing who girls went out with these days, look at the things you read in the papers about young women who'd always seemed quiet and sensible. Not that no one need say nothing against Tess, just let them try—— And then Mabel found Tess was talking about the de Greys. Funny thing now she always seemed interested in them, asking did she ever hear, and listening, taking in anything Mabel told her about the old days of ladies' trains at dinner parties, white kid gloves all lengths and every gentleman at the Club talking if a young lady walked down Melton Street, Barton Wells, with her skirt lifted to show above her ankle. Tess didn't laugh, in fact when she listened to those stories she was always at her most serious.

"I'd like to have lived then, Auntie, I mean have been a lady. Everybody is and isn't, now, but the real thing's still there, actually."

Talk of knocking her auntie endways. Mabel hurried to get one in this time.

"You'd better not bother your head with no ladies nor using silly words like all these 'actuallys'. Right's right for you, Tess, and you are lucky to live at a time when you can get a lot for nothing and not be no burden on your dad. There was underneath as well as on tops in those days. I'd like to see you in a cap and apron running to bells and carrying trays fit to break your back, with black beetles in the basement so bad we had to keep a hedgehog and what didn't Cookie say when she tripped over it?"

Tess nodded gravely, but what she meant by that Mabel couldn't make out. Then they met some friends of Dick's and he had to give all her attention to showing off enough to impress them and then they walked home, passing a cinema which was featuring two of Tess's favourite stars so Mabel promised to take her to the last house and when they got back to Beechcroft Avenue, they found Het had fair talked everybody out. Mabel seized the opportunity and soon had Het in the sulks. After playing her temper a little she passed the remark that where no offence was meant none need be taken and managed the rest of the visit exactly as she liked. They went back to Ringerton on the Monday, six-ten which even the Government hadn't been able to alter and on the Thursday morning at breakfast just as Mabel was describing a dream she had had about taking Paddy to children's service at St. Paul's and finding Tess ringing the bell for it, if a telegram didn't come:

Fixed for Saturday. Meet you Paddington, twelve twenty. How's the girl. Love. Paddy.

"There now!" exclaimed Mabel, scenting triumph before she recognized it. Not allowing herself time for thought she read the telegram aloud to Het and Doll.

"Paddy and his jokes, seems he can remember them even if he is getting married. Meeting me at Paddington and all, giving himself the trouble to look up the train. That's my Paddy-boy for you. Wedding'll be at St. Paul's, sure to, two thirty, proper time, I reckon; of course it'll be very quiet . . . oh, if his poor dad and mother could have lived to see the day. Talk about anybody's dream coming out. Now whatever am I going to do about my costume?"

It was a case of all tongues to the pumps. No view of Paddy's wedding could compete with the sartorial emergency it provoked. Het offered to sit down there and then and change revers, make the coat look quite nice again with that white silk of poor Mrs. Howland's. Doll suggested she and Mabe had better go straight along to Mrs. Marsh's in Meade Street and see if she hadn't got a hat. There'd been a felt with a bit of feather in front in her window, smart and not the style anybody in Ringerton would buy so it probably hadn't gone, and she might let the price down a bit because really it was time for straws but straws were such poor-looking things these days. All hatchets buried, the two Miss Barters went out to their gate, and immediately Bell Terrace tingled with their news, Ringerton caught the electric current and needed no telling. The felt at Mrs. Marsh's had rather mysteriously gone but a shiny straw had come in and, with a bow behind turning up over Mabel's pretty grey-brown ringlets of tight-curling hair, didn't suit her at all so bad and was proclaimed (out of Mrs. Marsh's hearing) cheap at the price. Return to Seven, Bell, disclosed Het, who really was a wonder with her needle, piecing what was left of the white silk and letting Mabel have the loan of a bit of Doll's lace to make a front for under the coat. Her mouth full of pins which made no difference to her powers of speech she held audiences all day long. The Bell neighbours popped in and out though none were so rash as to offer advice, and took the hint given by Doll to stand at their gates on Saturday morning and wait for Mabe to bow to them as she went past looking like Mabe always could when she was dressed up real smart.

"But of course it's my mink does it," she admitted to Doll

as they turned the corner to the station. Doll kept her smirk to herself. Mabe's mink was the pride of her life. Mrs. Howland had had a mink coat, when she died it was found very worn and Mr. Howland had paid to have the best bits of it made into a scarf for Bartie. Het and Doll had their own opinions (based on private investigations) of the value of the fur but they couldn't help preening themselves when walking with Mabe wearing it. She looked a queen, that was the truth, and whatever Mrs. Howland would have felt, her being only a little painted scrap of a thing——

"Well, you seem to be off at last. So long, Mabe. Cheerio! Say good-luck fr'm us all to Paddy?"

"I'll tell him if I think of it. Fair dazed I feel after the rush I've had. . . . Movin', really? That's right. Cheerio!"

Doll's face slid away with Ringerton station, it was a relief to feel that ear she kept on sticking in at the window to hear what Mabel said had gone. Mabel scowled absently at a very ordinary-looking girl, the only other occupant of the compartment and composed herself in a 'forwards facing' corner, she had her own views on draughts and didn't hold with 'backing'. She had told Doll she felt fair dazed but that wasn't exactly what she felt, it was something stranger than a normal buzz after excitement. The familiar fields, meek hills and mild clouds of a quiet countryside and a nondescript day went past the window and she realized she would have to make an effort not to let herself be stung by memories. Plain as that girl in the other corner she saw the stairs at the nursing home where Paddy was born and Mrs. Howland, with a nurse dancing round her, among her flowers—Mrs. Howland among other flowers, lying dead. Heard that queer groaning grunt Mr. Howland had given as he slid down the wall in the Wilton Crescent house hall. Saw Paddy in his little smock (the bother he'd had to get that posh Mayfair Kiddy-wear shop to do the mocking properly) playing with the ball she'd always known was a bit too hard for him, mercy it was only the drawing-room window he smashed with it and not his own eye. She could hear Paddy as he lifted him out of his pram chuckling: "Bartie—Bartie," in a funny little gurgle like he always did. If she'd loved him he'd loved her—the way children do. There was nothing to take the place of a child, no use talking about ingratitude when they grew and changed a bit. Paddy'd find all that out for himself one of these days. Her own Paddy's son. . . .

"Going on a bit too quick, aren't you?" Mabel asked herself, ironically, and at that very minute the engine gave a different sort

of whistle and the train began to gather pace in the way that meant the first pull of Paddington waiting for it. In no time at all Ealing Broadway, same as ever, was spinning by, and Mabel was drawing on her nice gloves, real good leather but not a lot of give in it, over hands that were clammy as well as cold. There now, the train was slowing to its curl round the final bend. They were running in. All her life as a daughter of the line Mabel had responded to that phrase summing up a successful journey. But to-day she had no time for thinking about the train. Paddy had said he would be here to meet her.

The train eased along the platform, past all the eyes searching the carriages. Mabel sprang up and blocked the window, waving a white handkerchief as she had promised herself she would do. No, not a sign of him. Yes, there he was, however could she have missed him? And beside him a girl.

"Oh, Paddy, my own precious." She had her arms round his neck to kiss him.

"Splendid, Bartie. Steady does it."

"Of all the sauce, telling me to be steady. Lemme look at you, Paddy, now you are a . . ."

"See, Bartie, this is Percy."

And at last Mabel had to turn to the girl who had been standing there waiting for her to do it. Her fighting nervousness dropped from her leaving only an inability to look otherwise than by glaring.

"Pleased, I'm sure. . . ." The instinct for challenge and retort took her so far and then abruptly deserted her. For the first time in her life her glare met its match. She seized on one point—this girl was as tall as herself, taller than Paddy, then she went down to the most peculiar kind of amazement. The eyes on a level with her own were a light grey, a perfect clear colour without a touch of either blue or green. They were very large and the long lashes not mascaraed but curled. The hair above them was black—whatever did girls do nowadays to make black hair look like that?—it shone, and seemed to grow blacker with every movement of its owner, it defied you with its beauty as only real golden hair used to do. Touched up, of course. And that arum-lily skin, it couldn't be natural although why, when she was about it, she hadn't put on a "little colour"? And why in the world she didn't speak instead of just standing there setting her eyes at you—the expression darted into Mabel's head and released her tongue.

"Yes, I'm Paddy's Bartie," she announced. "Come to his wedding. What's the matter, dear?"

The relief of turning to Paddy, whose every movement and twitch she knew! A smile broke over her face, completely changing it. Oh, yes, for Paddy's sake she'd do anything in the world, even try to love this great image of a girl.

"It's extraordinarily er—nice of you."

So she'd spoken at last, had she? Trouble with her speech, or was that little stammer put on?

"Nothing nice about wanting to be with Paddy," Mabel repressed a faint twinge at her pertness. Pertness remained although the girl was less than half her age.

"Sweet of you, then," the girl's calm face crinkled, giving Mabel quite a shock. So that was the way she'd got hold of Paddy, was it? At the same time Mabel was conscious of various passers-by, both men and women, glancing at the girl. And her pretending to take no notice, quite used to it, you could see that, considered herself a beauty, no doubt. Well, as a matter of fact, so she was, a proper startler, if it came to telling the truth.

"That maybe," snapped Mabel, managing to reinforce her glare into those wonderful real grey eyes. "And now what about it, Paddy? What time's your wedding?"

"I've got the car here. Let's go along to it, shall we?" Mabel realized how wild it made her to have to call a girl, 'Percy'. She gulped a little and pointedly repeated her question, "What about it, Paddy?"

"May as well." The poor boy looked shocking sheepish. Caught between the two of them—sternly Mabel snapped that line of thought. And what's more he wasn't looking too well, pale and thin, not so straight in the back. Starting his worries already. Through all the noise round them, the ear-split of engines shrieking to Paddington's roof, Mabel fancied she caught a sharp little sigh. "Yes, come along."

The car. It was Percy's, of course. Just the sort you might expect, once very smart, now a bit rough and shabby. A great, ex-showy thing, decided Mabel, contemptuously, probably not the girl's at all, borrowed or something of the sort, from some friend. She looked the kind of girl to have that class of friend.

"Wait a minute, I'll open the door for you, it sticks in a funny way." It would, thought Mabel, waiting grimly. She managed to get in nippily before Percy could help her. Just as she thought, the springs were gone a bit but sitting in a car again made her feel a little better. She gave Paddy and Percy a smirk.

"And now where to?" she demanded, roguishly.

Paddy looked at Percy and Percy gave him a quick look in return. Then they both scrambled into the car, Percy into the driver's seat and Paddy into the back to sit beside her.

"We're going to lunch. Revel's. You used to like Revel's, didn't you?"

"'Twas always a good place. Dad used to say nowhere could beat the food, didn't he? But, listen, dear it's getting on for one you'll never have the time, what with changing and everything. Hadn't we better just catch a cup of coffee and go straight to your flat, give ourselves nice time to get to the church? I suppose it's St. Paul's, that's quite a drive across the Park."

"Well, as a matter of fact there's no need to hurry. Percy have you got my cigarette case? Throw it over, will you? Thanks. Have one, Bartie? See, Bartie, we can take in all the lunch we want and enjoy ourselves because the black deed is done. Rather early this morning."

"You don't mean——?"

"That's it. We didn't actually know ourselves when it would be but we went along to the office and the clerk or whatever told us——"

"You were married in a registry office?"

"Simplest way of doing things. Practically painless and over at once. Percy wouldn't let me buy her any flowers. Her father turned up with some but she made him take them away. Or did he drop them on the table, Percy? It seemed to baffle him rather being left all bridal by himself like that."

"He took them at the last minute, guess he thought they'd do for his latest girl friend. Bartie, I'm afraid we've given you rather a stir, haven't we?"

Again and again afterwards Mabel reminded herself that she wouldn't have felt about it like she did if Percy hadn't turned and stared out of those eyes of hers, gone on staring. And her impudence being the one to ask such a question while poor young Paddy said nothing. It wasn't her place. Associations of the word 'place' gave Mabel a final jolt. Her temper flared while something beneath temper seethed and scalded her heart. Inviting her like that. Never letting her know. Letting Percy's father (whoever he might be) know all right. Coming to meet her with their tongues in their cheeks, and Paddy looking so poorly. Her own boy cheated out of about the one thing left he might have had proper like in the past. Never to be able to be near him in church with the right to stand for his parents and put up her love in prayers for him. T

miss St. Paul's that she'd looked forward to as much as anything. Well, if they'd done it to be cheap they had certainly succeeded. Mabel gulped the curd of bitterness. No, that wasn't why they had done it. 'Twas because they didn't, Paddy didn't, want her. . . . She might have been betrayed into answering Percy's question in a way she'd not be likely to forget if at that moment Paddy hadn't suddenly taken the wind out of her sails by sliding one arm round her neck and turning her head with his hand to kiss her. It was all she could do not to burst out crying like a great baby, and although she knew perfectly well he had simply done it to distract her she couldn't help feeling quite different, she blew her nose vigorously, whisked the handkerchief back into her posh bag that she hoped Percy noticed, and announced.

"'Tis not what I was looking for, naturally. But done is done and it's no use using one's tongue to lap up spilt milk. Well, dears, I hope you'll be 'appy," the second aitch failed her, of course Percy would notice that. "If good wishes can help I'm sure you've got mine. Henrietta's and Doll's, too, but I hope if Paddy should happen ever to get married again he'll arrange it different. Now all's said and ended and what was the idea about lunch? Not having a party, are you?"

"Just the three of us, Bartie."

"Not even Percy's dad?"

"No, not even."

"Wouldn't come I daresay." It was impossible to keep the bubbles of bitterness from breaking. Lucky she had the wrist-watch Mr. and Mrs. Howland had given her, it saved her to look down at it although of course it gave those two a chance to glance at each other over her head. "You driving, Percy? Pity not to let Paddy." She meant it too although it would have meant no Paddy sitting beside her. Everything was wrong, even this lunch that wasn't a party. Perhaps the party was coming off afterwards and they weren't going to tell her.

Paddy took hold of her hand and Percy started the car and drove expertly through traffic worse than it ever used to be, to Revel's famous restaurant, back again after the bombing in Maddox street. On Paddy's exeats from school he and Mr. Howland and Bartie had always lunched there. London went past in a blur of dingy, nightmare familiarity and noise but Revel's was a lot too dear, with the corner table where the three of them had always sat, Mr. Howland, who was wonderful with head waiters, seeing to it. Paddy didn't remember, and it didn't seem quite the moment

to remind him. The place wasn't full and they got a fairly good table in the middle. The lunch was wonderful, considering, and of course Paddy had to order champagne which was always funny stuff to pay that price for, and reminded her of the last time she'd had it—at Paddy's christening.

"For me to drink the health, isn't it?" She had a faint twinge then of the spasm of pride she had promised herself. But when it was over she felt worse. She drank the champagne gingerly and even then was attacked by prickles in her nose. At the very same moment she met Percy's grey eyes over her glass. Another of the girl's stares, they were enough to get on anybody's nerves. She set down her own glass and stared back at the brilliant hair, strange aggressive beauty, casual air of being at home in a restaurant. Percy drank her champagne and smiled at her. But this time Mabel was proof against her smile. She leaned over the table and spoke fast.

"You'll excuse me, if I say that standing as I do for almost a relation to Paddy I'd like to hear something about you. Not just that you've got a good job and live in a flat. Where was you at school, Percy? And what about where you was born and brought up? You a London girl?"

"Yes, I suppose I am." She brought that out in a very queer way. Paddy turned to her quickly, and the undeceivable instinct of passionate, loving jealousy told Mabel that she had turned their tables for them. They had meant to make a show of fussing over her, now they could only think of each other. So there was something that shouldn't be in Percy's past. Oh, she'd known it all along. Her voice hardened, triumphantly.

"Well, *I* suppose you ought to know. Anyways you're not one of those who used to come to our kiddies' parties in Wilton Crescent. Wonderful shows they were. Do you remember the conjurer with the balloons from his gloves, Paddy? Those balloons was floating about the house for days. You haven't forgotten how Helen opened the door to the parcel postman and one blew out into his face and burst? I thought Helen was having hysterics but 'twas just she couldn't stop herself laughing, and you and me sat down on the stairs and laughed too till we cried. Your dad came out of the smoking-room to hear what the hullabaloo was about. It's nice to go back to thinking of those old times, isn't it?"

Neither Paddy or Percy answered her and just then Percy sighted a friend at the very corner table sacred to those old times. She waved first (Mabel noted that) and then the friend got up

and came over to them. A man, of course, and in a short time he was followed by one of those girls who look as if they have inhaled their own chests while chain-smoking. Percy perked up at once. Obviously these were the sort of people she was accustomed to and felt at ease with. Mabel dressed them down with a look and then felt a sharp pang. No doubt about it they were more Percy's kind than Paddy, who gave them a nervous grin, something like he used to give Bartie when the train taking him back to school was pulling out of the station. It hurt enough to make her draw in her breath with a little whistle and then she heard those three talking about someone they called 'Bob' and the man saying, "When Bob Hallam was around with that crowd——"

Hadn't Percy's first husband's name been Hallam? Couldn't be talking about him to-day? Yes, they were. Did ever anybody know anything like it? A hiccup convulsed Mabel, then she sat cold and rigid, her lunch sticking half way down. Percy took her glass, and saying casually, "You don't mind, do you, Bartie?" filled it with the last of the champagne and gave it to the man pushing her own towards the girl.

"Drink up, healths and so on, Yes, done it."

"Marvellous. When?" they jabbered, together.

"Oh, this morning, quite early. Matter of fact I don't believe Paddy was awake."

"Good for Paddy. Yes, he does look rather drowsy." It was the girl who added that and it infuriated Mabel. The look the hussy gave Paddy was disgusting. All of them giggling in the new-fangled clipped-off kind of way, not one of them, not even Paddy realizing the shocking bad taste of how they were going on.

The waiter set down ices and Mabel bent over hers desperately. She did not look up again until those two had moved off. Percy and Paddy had probably exchanged another of their glances because they both started to try and make themselves very pleasant. Percy asked Bartie to pour the coffee and gave no sign of noticing the way she refused. She drank it with her little finger stuck out and left the sugar in the bottom of the cup. Before Percy had finished hers she started drawing on her gloves.

"See, Bartie, I thought we'd go on to a picture or something," said Paddy, and she recognized the tone. But it was too late for tones now.

"Did you, dear? Well, I'd be pleased, I'm sure, but I've got one or two things I must do. And I'll have to hurry. Not neither of you I don't mean. You stay on and finish your coffee and p'raps

you'll see some more of your friends. It's been ever so nice lunching like this, quite a treat even if one couldn't call it exactly like a wedding. All I trust and pray is, you'll be happy . . . now don't get up. No, Paddy, I can find me own way to the door, I haven't forgotten. . . ."

"Good-bye, and thank you for c-coming, Bartie." Mabel received that by looking Percy up and down. It was genuine enough for a girl of her sort and there was no doubt about it carrying a hint of apology, even of pleading. Mabel finished her inspection and her head twitched as if she were shaking it.

"Thank *you*, Percy. Best of luck. Cheerio. Well, Paddy, if you won't be satisfied unless you do . . ."

They went out of the big room, leaving Percy by herself at the crumpled table. Mabel had to kiss Paddy good-bye, but she did it hurriedly, and pushed away the hand with a pound note in it.

"I'd be sorry if I couldn't afford to come up to my own boy's wedding. That is, to see my boy on his wedding day. God bless you, dear. I'll be thinking of you night 'n' morning and plenty in between, same as I always have. Till next time, son." She had to hurry away then because it had always been a principle with her never to let Paddy see tears in her eyes. He'd go back to that wife of his, and they'd say, "Good old Bartie," no laughing or running her down or nothing, just kind and cool and relieved. Then they wouldn't bother about her no more. Oh, she'd only got the past now. Percy couldn't take that away from her. She'd spend the rest of the time until her train went going back to it. The dear old Nines and Thirty-Threes were still running. She took a Nine in Piccadilly and got out at Hyde Park Corner as she always had to enjoy that bit of a walk. There was Wilton Crescent, there was their own house, how many times hadn't she clapped that front door? It didn't look quite the same because nothing did. All the London houses had that queer look of having been shocked even if they had escaped blast. The windows were bare of curtains and dreadfully dirty. Nice people hadn't got it, did nice people get anything any more? She only paused in front of it and then went on walking round the streets where she had pushed Paddy's perambulator or held his hand as he trotted beside her, chattering. What a child he had been to talk and notice everything they passed. She thought of going on to that little street off Sloane Street where those two girls had kept the teashop she and Paddy were so fond of, slipping round for a lark on his pocket-money days, or when

Mr. Howland had given either of them a present. But instinct warned her better not, the place would have gone, might only be a hole in the ground and she couldn't stand no more turns to-day. In the end she went into St. Paul's and stayed on her knees most of the time, not even remembering her stockings or her skirt. It wasn't on her own account, she'd never lay claim to be one for religion like Doll; it was for Paddy. Someone started to play the organ and she realized she'd only just about got time to get to Paddington by Underground. It was exactly like travelling in a dream, the familiar roar of the long tunnels, the platforms coming at you, not you coming to them, the craning to catch the names of the stations (she was a proper country bumpkin now, in the old days she'd known the order of the stations, never had to look). From all of it she was at a dream's remove, and even catching her toe on the edge of a step jolted without waking her. She didn't get back to herself until she climbed into her carriage at Paddington and there, of all people, sitting in the corner seat she generally made for, was the Vicar of Ringerton. That session in St. Paul's helped Mabel in two ways, the second of them being to establish her in the right mood to tackle the Vicar. She liked him well enough, although his practices called for tart remarks over Seven, Bell's Sunday dinner table. Repressing the recollection of a whispered demand to Doll as to why they didn't have out sandwich-men to join the Palm Sunday procession, she sat down opposite him and passed the time of day with vigour.

Up for a wedding, the Vicar confirmed, pleasantly, for he, with the rest of Ringerton knew the cause of Mabel's excursion. That was right, Mabel agreed him instantly. And a lovely one it had been, very quiet, of course, like most young people seemed to want nowadays. They'd had the breakfast—lunch really, at Revel's. For old time's sake, the place had been a favourite with the bridegroom's parents, and it seemed smart again to judge by the people luncheon. No, they'd been quite a small party.

"And it was me to propose the health." Had she better have kept that to herself? Country Vicars were shrewd men nowadays, they went up and down to London, they understood what once upon a time you could have relied on their not understanding. Her own shrewdness told her to emphasize the possible mistake with a nod. "Must admit I was flattered. 'Course I'm almost as good as Captain Howland's nearest relation seeing that he is . . ." he kept on talking until the train pulled out. As far as she knew he said nothing she might be sorry for afterwards but the Vicar's

close attention was faintly suspicious. He gave one or two ecclesiastical inclinations of the head and as Hayes and Harlington rocked away behind them he remarked:

"I hope young Howland appreciates his luck. Not many men can count on that sort of devotion when their parents are dead. What a good thing he is marrying a girl who encourages his affections, his sense of duty and gratitude."

Mabel stiffened against the hard upholstery of her corner. Percy to get credit for what was all Paddy's own doing. The Vicar ought to see her. The vicar looking down at his evening paper at that moment Mabel was able to glare at him. Then she flounced round and stared out at the blameless Middlesex fields. She went on protesting to herself but the Vicar's words echoed between her angry thoughts. Well, of course it would be all for the best if Percy turned out not so bad. She was tired now, far more tired than she allowed herself to credit, only satisfaction could have kept her up, admitting what she didn't want to weakened her. She leaned back and closed her eyes to spend the rest of the journey to Ringerton being jolted in and out of sleep. When they arrived at last the Vicar was very nice in helping her out of their carriage so that everybody on the platform could see. But of course there weren't many people at that time of the evening and as it happened one of the few was Stan Hawkins. If there was one more than another she felt she couldn't stand just then it was Stan. Generally he could take a hint but this evening it seemed he couldn't and instead of keeping back and letting her walk to the cross-roads with the Vicar he pushed himself forward and kept beside her all the way home. She didn't care to remember how she snapped him every time he tried to speak, not that he gave her much trouble that way, just plodded along at her side, the aggravating fellow. It was beginning to rain, an early night mist due to turn to a soak presently. Barely wishing Stan good night she whisked in at Seven, Bell's gate and hurried up the path. Doll had the door open before she reached it and she dived in, pulling off her mink and shaking it free of the raindrops.

"Well?" demanded Doll, all the inquisitiveness, the suspicion, the malice satisfied in advance warning of what she would have to endure for the next few weeks, in her voice. Het came out of the kitchen and said "Well, Mabe?" in just the same way, only worse. Mabel went on shaking her mink and managed to flick it in their faces.

"I'm going straight up to take my things off and my news

can wait," she snapped and pushed Het aside to charge up the stairs. All the journey back in the train every time she'd come out, of dozing she had promised herself a good cry to-night when she was safe in bed. Now she knew she wouldn't be able to let out a tear, 'twas as if she'd swallowed a packet of starch and stiffened her heart inside her.

CHAPTER THREE

"MABE, here's Tommy from Three says you are wanted on the phone."

"Did your mother take the call, Tommy? Your dad's not at home, is he?"

Mabel came to the door in a way that once could have caused rustling. She was always equal to the telephone; what hadn't she achieved and avoided on it in the Wilton Crescent days? She frowned at Tommy, but quite kindly realizing it wasn't his fault that his people were the only ones in Bell Terrace to have a phone, and just because Mr. Moody's being in the Gas Company he was liable to be needed quick. Tommy, she was glad to see, registered the reproach although it was only by scratching a scarred knee.

"That's right."

"Miss Barter, please, Tommy."

"Miss Barter. It's from the Ring of Bells, Miss Barter Mum says."

"What'n the world does the Ring of Bells want me for?" demanded Mabel of the wind blowing down the length of Bell. It 'ud never do for the neighbours to start saying the local was always wanting Mabel Barter on the phone. She stalked out of the house and walked along to Three with the same impressive movement which once combined with a vast white starched bow forming the background to a nineteen-inch waist graced Mrs. de Grey's drawing-room.

"Thank you for sending Tommy along, Mrs. Moody," she said, with ornamental politeness, but not really thinking of what she was saying for a queer feeling was coming over her. All these weeks since Paddy's wedding she had been suffering and pain brings

many and sometimes curious ways of healing itself. She'd always had an instinct about Paddy and now it seemed to have taken a different turn. Of course she'd be the last to claim second sight or anything fanciful but you might talk about something like a buzzer in her chest going off to warn her. She wasn't a bit surprised to pick up Mrs. Moody's very warm receiver and hear his voice.

"Bartie? That you?"

"Seein' 'twas me you asked for, yes, I should 'ope so. Well, my dear?"

"Bartie, we've got a room here, and we're down for the weekend. Tell you why later. May we come along and see you?"

"Bless the boy, whatever else should you think of doing? 'Course you'll have to take us as you find us, but you won't mind that, will you? How's Percy?"

"Fine. Sends her love. Didn't you get her letter?"

"Never had no letter," stated Mabel, grimly. "Now, dear, I'll expect you in about ten minutes. You know your way from the Ring-O'?"

She passed the time of day kindly with Mrs. Moody and returned royally as she had come to Seven but her mind was still on something else. Gingerly but quite firmly she tested the something else. Could it be true that she no longer felt a softie about Paddy? Love him? Yes, she loved him more than ever and fair ached to see him, but the terrible fear of his handing her what she couldn't bear wasn't tormenting her any longer. Instead of clinging to him she felt she could stand and look at him, inspect him quite calmly. And that reminded her, Het and Doll were going to get their first eyeful of Percy, let alone everybody else who could bob at one of Bell's windows.

"Now, girls," she called them as soon as she completed her dive in at Seven's door. Excitement would start at once and she meant to ride it. "Whatever do you think?" She gave her news quite straight as was necessary, but with a meaning and emphasis which would warn those two. Then she dashed upstairs to tidy, only wishing she had time to put that clear varnish Mrs. Howland had taught her to use on her nails. Down below there was a fine jabbering going on, nothing to what there would be presently. . . . Oh, mercy, the gate clicking and she'd only just remembered how bad the sitting-room mantelpiece wanted a dust. Never mind, she comforted herself grimly as she ran downstairs, maybe she'd soon have worse to worry about than the sitting-room mantelpiece. Yes, there were Paddy and Percy being let in by Doll with Het

coming out of the kitchen to goggle at them. She called out as loud as she could:

"Well, my dears?" and swept along the narrow passage to be struck fair all of a heap by Percy. It was amazing and as her feelings settled a little Mabel realized what a blessing it was that Percy should look so dramatically impressive. Of course she was very unsuitable in the country but unsuitable on a grand scale. That little Camilla Dering was nowhere beside her. Automatically Mabel registered the detail and got in a glance at Het who was almost pale with the start she'd had. While kissing Paddy soundly she inspected Percy with increasing satisfaction. Fawn corduroy slacks, and a coat to match slung on her shoulders over a pullover of an unusual deep blue green. She had evidently been wearing a green ribbon on her head but had pulled it off and now it was dancing under her long surprisingly white fingers. She really looked as if one of these modern artists was going to paint her. Those eyes again, that hair standing up in a crest and gleaming. Mabel finished kissing Paddy and found she had to take a hand held out to her.

"I'm sorry you didn't get my letter, Bartie. I promised Paddy to write. We didn't have any honeymoon, you know, so we thought we'd catch ourselves this. And we both wanted to see you because that day was rather bitsy, wasn't it?"

"I 'ope you didn't put yourselves to all this trouble just to see me," said Mabel, archly. She felt equal to anything, not even afraid she wouldn't be able to stop the truth about the wedding slipping out.

"Won't Paddy and Mrs. Paddy like to come into the sitting-room?" Het had to push herself forward, of course. "I'll just run up the blinds." She'd probably pulled them down on purpose. "This way, madam."

"You don't mind do you, Percy?" Mabel countered Het's 'madam' instantly.

"I'll love anything." From a less flamboyant creature the statement would have sounded sober, even a little anxious to please. Mabel nodded at Het to attend to the blinds and continued to be jocular.

"Now let's have a good look at you."

"Oh, don't. I'm feeling terrible. There has been a frantic rush at my office and I've worked nearly all night for a week. I can hardly keep my eyes open and it's hard on Paddy marrying a hag."

"I don't see much difference, I'm sure."

"That's extraordinarily sweet of you, but perhaps I looked

just as alarming that day, anyhow I felt it. Getting married is probably quite simple when you've got nothing else to do, it's when you are busy anyway that complications set in. Paddy has been rather pushed around, too, still, better than not enough on hand, isn't it?"

"That's the way to look at it." Mabel sat down in her mother's old chair and had her good look at Percy. The girl seemed to be sorter trying to apologize. It wasn't her style, she'd better stick to her boom-de-ay business, no use pretending she wasn't one of those who light the cigarette at both ends. I'd like to know the truth about her, thought Mabel, sharply, and banished the thought for Paddy's sake. She turned to Paddy and gave him the smile which changed her face to a demanding Madonna's.

"But you need a little fat putting on you, dear. I know all about rations but even them don't answer for only skin over your bones. Two days in the country aren't going to do you much good."

"That's what Percy and I were saying. It 'ud be grand if we could get out of Town more, most week-ends perhaps. Ringerton has quite daisied her, she says it smells of smoked honey and she has never seen any other place with hedges six feet deep and a river full of broken glass that sparkles instead of just being old bottle. We were wondering if we could catch a cottage around here?"

"Oh, you'd never get no cottage but there's sometimes the chance of a bungalow. You know, Mabe, those that are still going up on the side of None Down Hill?"

"Paddy'd never live in a place like that mess on None Down Hill." Mabel glared furiously at Doll. If Het had said a fool thing like that she'd have understood it, Doll oughter have known better. "Bungalows? More like cardboard boxes coloured with chalk and stuck out in a field to flatten into pulp again with the first thunderstorm. No, if Paddy and Percy want decent walls and a roof above their heads they'd better try for Mr. Greenhaugh's. He's leaving to live with his son at Portishead."

Het and Doll turned to stare at her, their mouths dropping open before going into action. Mabel went a dark, freckled pink and tossed her head with violence. It was Doll's own fault, with her None Down Hill nonsense. Of course that rumour about Mr. Greenhaugh leaving was only gossip but she wasn't going to have Doll or Het pretending to Paddy and his wife that they were the ones in the know. She'd spoken before she'd rightly thought but on the whole she wasn't sorry. Paddy and Percy were both looking

at her as people do look nowadays if you tell them you've passed the gate and sniffed an old 'To be Let or Sold' board behind it. After all it was possible Mr. Greenhaugh might be bribed to put it candidly, to give up a struggle with rising rates and the new cistern Stan Hawkins said he needed and go to play cuckoo in his son's nest. All might depend on what Paddy—or Percy—could do in the way of an offer. The Barter interest in money to pass, to burn or to boot out the truth about, pricked Mabel and made her look at Paddy and Percy hard. Then she realized she was still a fraction of a jump ahead of Het and Doll and burst out before they could:

"Try for Mr. Greenhaugh's, I said. No harm in asking. Paddy and me could go up and see him. Paddy and me and Percy I mean. What do you say, my dears?" she concluded, nobly.

"It sounds too utterly marvellous." Percy spoke quite reverently. Mabel, who had to avoid Het's and Doll's eyes anyway, inspected her relentlessly. She was deliberately if subconsciously provoking a challenge and if Percy had accepted it they might have acknowledged themselves enemies. But Percy's eyes met hers steadily and the strange grey seemed to warm a little as if Percy wanted to smile and didn't dare. Mabel felt hot all down her neck and tossed her head just as Paddy broke in.

"Worth a shot. Will you really take us, Bartie? Any time you say . . . we want you to have lunch with us at the pub."

"We'll talk about that later," stated Mabel, deciding against a lot of thanks which might make Het and Doll think she was jumping at it. She rose and turned to them. "What do you say, girls? Now's as good a time as any other to catch Mr. Greenhaugh. He's one of those that hasn't nothing to do except potter. Percy needn't be surprised at catching him in his shirt sleeves, and I dare say it isn't the sort of thing she'd mind, is it, Percy?" Having created Percy to a taste of her quality when on her native heath and drawn, magnificently, the wind out of Het's and Doll's sails, she added, pleasantly. "I'll just pop up and put my hat on. You know Percy my screen of Paddy, Doll, and if she could fancy a cup of coffee Het can make it for her. There's not all that hurry, really."

She did not, of course, risk giving those two an opportunity of wasting a moment upstairs, and when she came down there was Het looking as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth while Doll showed Percy the firescreen enclosing all Paddy's baby photographs that Mr. Howland had had specially made for her at one of the best places in Sloane Street. Not much harm done, Mabel

told herself, but she took the precaution of giving the girls a straight look as she drew on her gloves and announced:

"Ready, dears."

Mr. Greenhaugh's bungalow had been built more than twenty years ago and cleverly placed on a shelf of an easy sloping hill which Ringerton did not consider a hill at all, dubbing it merely 'up on the Barleigh road'. It was about a quarter of an hour's sharp walk from Bell Terrace, supposing anybody found it a pull they might take nearly half an hour to get there. A good belt of beeches stood on the crest behind the bungalow, altogether it was as neat a little place as one could find anywhere and Mabel, attacked by a twinge of fellow-feeling was almost glad to reflect that there was little chance of a pair of young scatterbrangers getting the run of it.

She received, however, what she was later obliged to admit to Doll was a proper shock. As Paddy opened the gate for her and Percy Mr. Greenhaugh came out of his front door with Morris Hawkins, one of Stan's brothers. Mr. Greenhaugh, as prophesied, was in his shirt sleeves, but he showed not a sign of embarrassment being apparently sunk too deep in depression. It appeared that Morris Hawkins had been called in to diagnose trouble with the boiler. Diagnose it he had, with a specialist's confirmation of the worst. A new boiler as well as a new cistern was necessary if Mr. Greenhaugh didn't want to find himself blown up one of these days. Mr. Greenhaugh, plunged in gloom, had even passed the stage of saying "That's right". He produced a vast cotton bandana and blew his nose hollowly at his nice little garden. Mabel, felling ever s'sorry for him, was distracted for a moment and missed her chance. Paddy and Percy rushed in, both speaking at once. Percy got the lead away from Paddy and made her offer with a coolness, a casualness, and at the same time a peculiar smartness which Mabel confessed to Doll struck her all of a heap.

"I know prices are terrible these days. We'll give you two thousand down if we can have vacant possession. More or less right away. When you've made your arrangements, of course. And we'll take over all repairs and dilapidations. Will the boiler last Mr. Greenhaugh out, do do think, Mr. Hawkins?"

There was no doubt about it, Percy spoke very pretty, and as smart as if she'd been an auctioneer. Getting both the names right was a clever touch and she kept her smile back until it didn't look like she was using it to coax a couple of pairs of trousers. Of course it was her bringing out 'two thousand down' settled the

natter. Mr. Greenhaugh pushed the bandana into his pocket and blinked. Morris Hawkins coughed and stared at him without blinking. Mr. Greenhaugh heaved a long hitched sigh. Lugubriously he inquired:

"Like to come in and look round?"

The deal was as good as done. Percy went on behaving very prettily but it was evident she hardly troubled to look round her. Obviously she'd alter the whole place before you could say 'knife' to its present condition barely interested her. Paddy took a lot more notice, he'd always liked poking around places from a child. Old-fashioned, in a way of speaking. Mr. Greenhaugh had one of those clocks that turn a little glass tube and make it look like water running into a miniature fountain-trough. Mabel could tell Paddy longed to ask if he might buy it with the bungalow. She yielded to her desire to stand beside him and whisper to him and Morris Hawkins stuck near them, closing one of his unblinking eyes, thus producing the effect of a petrified wink. All the real business was done by Percy tackling Mr. Greenhaugh rather as if she was taking a corkscrew to him. As they walked down the Earleigh road afterwards she admitted to Mabel and Paddy that she never thought she'd get his agreement in actual words.

"Can you take us to some sort of lawyer's office at once, Bartie? We must get the old man to sign up before he has his dinner; he may feel better about the boiler afterwards and roll backwards."

Could Mabel take Percy and Paddy to Weston, Cranmer and Pildean's in the middle of Ringerton High Street? Could she walk between them, the three abreast on High Street's narrow pavement, and go first into the shabby little place that always smelt of mouse suffering from indigestion after a feast of old files? Could she show Jim Brewer, the office boy, even if they did call him a clerk, where he'd get off if he didn't make haste and hint to Mr. Pildean that he had better make haste too? Could she smirk secretly watching the effect of Percy on Jim and then on Mr. Pildean who was supposed to be all right enough but who Mabel herself, personally, didn't care for? Could she preside the interview and manage, quite successfully to conceal her astonishment at Percy's cuteness and display of business head? What really flabbergasted her was the matter of the money to be paid over. No doubt about it Percy could get her hand on whatever she wanted, it seemed that two or three thousand made no difference to her. Mabel's smirk deepened and then began to fade. There was something fishy about such financial ease and she only hoped Mr. Pildean didn't share her opinion. He

kept on staring at Percy in a funny way but of course it might be her looks still knocking him. In the end (and the end came with a rapidity probably never encountered in the offices of Weston, Cranmer and Pildean before), Percy took him off by herself, marched him away up to the Barleigh Road to get Mr. Greenhaugh's signature to the agreement she carried while Mr. Pildean's impressive case flapped empty at his side. Mabel could have enjoyed a good laugh at their backs and Mr. Pildean's trot beside Percy's graceful stride, if she hadn't realized that she and Paddy were standing in the middle of the High Street, left behind in full view of Ringerton. She glanced at Paddy almost indignantly. Now she came to think of it he had hardly said a word and it was clear even to Jim Brewer that he wasn't producing a ha'penny of the money. She was just going to speak when Paddy returned her glance and smiled.

"We'll go and start our lunch, shall we? Percy won't mind; as a matter of fact I expect she'll only want coffee and a cigarette. Wonder girl, isn't she? And the biggest wonder about her is why she ever married me. We are still on the job, honeymooning, you know, Bartie."

It was an assurance and a warning. Mabel wanted neither; she wanted to talk as she always had, quite straight to Paddy. By themselves like this at lunch she would just have got the opportunity. Paddy, letting her know he was a married man with a wife stuck between them. Her lips trembled with the force of the words on the tip of her tongue. But it was no good, you couldn't in her own phrase, come betwixt man and wife even if the man was her own dear boy. As a matter of fact she had tried it long ago with Dick and Jean and it had only made things worse. She'd never take that risk with Paddy, he needn't be afraid. Paddy gave no sign of being afraid of anything. He settled to his lunch and they had soup (which they both enjoyed for Mabel banished the old fear of the spoon at her mouth squeaking), quite decent mutton stew, vegetables that weren't properly cooked, of course, and what the Ring O' liked to call custard pie with stewed fruit—prunes and them not five minutes soaked, with a bit of skin stuff over what nobody without a sauce would ever dare say was pastry. Paddy was grinning in the old way as he agreed with Mabel's summing up when Percy came in. She asked for cheese and biscuits with her coffee and smoked all over the table instead of inhaling; you could see she was very pleased with herself.

"Mr. Pildean's quite good. He got to work on poor old Greenhaugh and we had him on the dotted line at once. He thinks his

on will come down with a van and take him and the furniture away. There isn't really much of it but of course as Mr. Pildean says, it seems a lot to him. He's going to write to his son to-night. Then as soon as he fixes I'm getting the Hawkins firm in. We met one of them—is he called Stanley?—on the way back. That's why I'm so late. Mr. Pildean told me who he was and I stopped him and asked if he'd come on the job. I've ordered the new boiler and cistern and asked him to find me someone to decorate. Of course I hope to do a bit myself, week-ends, as soon as we can camp out there. Can you colour-wash, Paddy? Can he, Bartie? Good, then we'll get the place passable in a week or two. I'll tell Papa we are practically ready for the stuff to come down."

"Is your dad giving you your furniture for his wedding present?" asked Mabel, quickly.

Percy blew another cloud of smoke. The question had caught her out, no doubt about that. After the blow of smoke she paused and Mabel simmered waiting for the answer.

"Yes, in a way, I suppose he is. Some stuff he has around—stored—and doesn't want at present. It may be all wrong for the place but it's useless to try for what one really wants now. Perhaps I'll be able to buy a few decent garden swing chairs and some of this new kitchen equipment. Don't know. Have to see."

Yes, and talking of seeing, my girl, watch your step, Mabel postrophized her silently. She didn't know what it was but that little enlargement about Percy's papa having the stuff stored made her suspicious. Percy'd do better to keep on talking as if whatever he wanted was in her bag, not try any explaining. Might be as well to give her the hint before gossip started in Ringerton. Mabel shook her head at Paddy's cigarette case. These two were going to live near enough to Ringerton for the village hum to set about them. Experienced and wary as she was not until this moment had she realized what a hum about Percy might mean. Of course, the girl's probably all right, just comes of a free and easy lot. Some people still have enough to throw around, she pulled herself up uncomfortably. If she was going to keep on talking like that all round the village . . .

"No, dear, thank you. I don't smoke in public when I'm home. Now take my advice, Percy, go slow at first," she coughed lightly. "I'm sure we none of us want to hear a lot of silly chatter about people taking a bungalow because they couldn't rent Buckingham Palace, nor find eyes stuck in the hedge when you and Paddy is playing about in the garden or keeping the windows too wide open."

Paddy gurgled with laughter. Mabel gave him a look of reproof and then glanced at Percy. Percy had let down her fringed lids and was frowning absently at her cigarette; Paddy's laughter had given her time to assume a mask, no finding out now if she knew what Mabel meant. Cool wasn't the word for the young woman. Ready for anything, too ready; must have had some experience she'd never let on about.

"What's the matter, Bartie?"

"Matter, dear?"

"Are you cold? You were shivering."

"There's always a nasty draught through this place," proclaimed Mabel, firmly. "But I wouldn't say I was cold, not exactly. Now let's hear some more about this bungalow business. A week-end here and there won't be much good if you want to keep the Hawkinses up to their work. Not that they aren't reliable. George is looked on as about the most trustworthy chap in his line in these parts, but they've more orders than they can fill and human nature's human nature, isn't it? If you aren't around there's others that are."

"That'll be all right, Bartie. We'll give you power of attorney to act for us."

"What does Percy say to that?" demanded Mabel, very pointedly, and could not resist adding. "Her bungalow, isn't it?"

"Only just." Percy looked up from her cigarette and smiled nicely enough but without a trace of that pleading expression. Gone for good, thought Mabel, suddenly. "Why, of course, I'll be eternally grateful if Bartie will oversee the Hawkinses while they are rootling about with the plumbing. Could you get hold of some little man who'd do just what he was told about the decorating, Bartie? I'm rather afraid of the Hawkinses bringing in a firm which would have proper feelings and proper feelings about decorating are the devil. It means all the shades turn out tooth-on-edge instead of what one chose."

"Certainly I can inquire. There's little Frank Parks for one. Some say he's a natural but people in Ringerton'll say anything. All I know is you can make him mind you if you go the right way about it and the decorating's in his blood. His father used to work at all the big houses round about before he got his trouble which was the tremensens though why I don't know, for he may have liked his glass but he wasn't nothing to some I could mention."

"Frank Parks sounds grand. You deal with him, will you, Bartie? I say, I suppose you don't feel you could walk al

the way up to the bungalow again?" That was Paddy, and Mabel was delighted to hear him taking possession of the bungalow. For his sake she'd have walked her heels off into the dust of the Barleigh Road and anyway now she was as eager as either of them to look over the place which was no longer Mr. Greenhaugh's. The rest of the week-end was most satisfactory, not to say quite exciting. Mabel had all her meals except breakfast at the Ring of Bells and in between the three of them were at the bungalow busily discovering all it needed done to it. The next week-end, Percy said, they were absolutely booked, couldn't possibly come down again; they'd have a shot at the week-end after; in the meantime Bartie was in charge of everything and would she harry the Hawkinses? Quite kindly, of course, but be utterly firm.

They almost overlooked Mr. Greenhaugh 'who hadn't gone yet.' But Mabel assured them very privately that she thought she could manage that, and achieved a triumph which reminded her of old days. On the following Friday Syd Greenhaugh brought his van, and his father and his father's goods were piled into it and driven away. Mabel stood alone, flushed her red-mauve, in the middle of the sitting-room floor tasting a pleasure which did not need the spice of being shared with anybody. Rain pattered in at the windows she had flung wide to let out the fusty, old-man smell; for those few minutes she forgot what she had said to Percy about too-open windows, she forgot everything except that she'd got the chance to have Paddy and his Percy in Ringerton under her thumb. She walked down the Barleigh Road home to be very high-and-mighty with Het and Doll who had been at the gate when Stan Hawkins was passing and probably made up what he said about the bungalow.

"There's some as have to poke their tongues in where they can't get their noses," she asserted, with a look for each of those two and one over her shoulder for the absent Stan. "Well, I shan't have time to listen to no nonsense that's quite clear. Mr. Greenhaugh's gone and Morris Hawkins and his boy come in to-morrow. I've promised to be up at the bungalow while the work's going on and up at the bungalow I mean to be. It's no use Paddy and Percy coming down again, until I send them word. If you two happen to be wasting your time at the gate again and see Frank Marks, tell him to come up to me. I've got the arranging of everything and if I do say it myself as shouldn't there's no one else who'd make poor Frank a bit of use. We shall see what we shall see," Mabel concluded as one who had done her own seeing already.

"There's some as talk too big," muttered Doll. She and Het exchanged glances. Mabel, taking no notice, allowed herself a sniff just to let them know they couldn't put nothing past her. She wasn't going to have a quarrel although no one knew better than she the sulphurous threat which brooded over Seven, Bell, when one didn't break to clear the air. For once in a way she was able to ignore the girls and concentrate entirely on her own business of the bungalow. Whatever happened about the decorating she'd got the management of the Hawkinses over the cistern and the boiler. Morris had better have in Stan as well as his boy; she'd ring him first thing in the morning. Mrs. Moody could listen to her doing it, then Bell would get its information straight, no more of that whispering over gates, drat Het and Doll. She did her ringing so early that Mr. Moody as well as his wife was able to listen to her. Then she announced that she was off up the Barleigh Road but as a matter of fact she hurried down to the corrugated iron shed which served the firm of Hawkins as headquarters and just caught George in the nick of time. Couldn't say when he'd be able to get delivery of a boiler? What was that doing nothing over in the corner? Promised these six months? Did ever anyone hear such rubbish? He'd put it in his van and take it up the Barleigh Road right away, and it was no good spinning her a tale about the cistern because Morris had told Mr. Greenhaugh he had one that 'ud just suit. On the whole she thought she'd wait and watch the boiler on to the van. While she was waiting she might have a look at the cistern. Never being one to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar Mabel finished up by asking George if Morris, Stan and the boy had been going to take a dartboard up to the bungalow seeing they didn't intend to do no proper work there? In the end she deigned to get into the van herself, sitting in front with Morris while Stan and the boy, the boiler and the cistern were loaded together behind.

For the next three weeks she had, as she allowed all Ringerton to know, her hands full. The mess those Hawkinses made wasn't to be believed and so she told them to their hot, grimed faces in the intervals of a din like nobody'd never heard.

"That's good," exclaimed Stan, suddenly. Hadn't had a word to say for hisself for more'n ten days and then brought that out. Mabel who was just about to go and inspect the horrid entrails of decayed plumbing lying about the garden stopped to glare at the flat red ear under that everlasting cap.

"There's good and good for nothing," she pronounced in the

loud voice adopted to challenge the din. "And if people don't know the difference more's the pity. Still this I will say for you, Stan. When anyone shows you they aren't going to let you off you do stick at your job. Slow you may be, but I'd call you steady."

"I'm steady, all right." Stan drew a hideous shudder of sound from a lead pipe with which he was dealing and then pushed his cap back showing the dingy ring it left on his moist baldness. "You know all about it, don't you, Mabe?"

"Well, of all the impudence. . . . Mabel to you, please, Stan, and I'd have no objection to Miss Barter."

"I daresay." Stan pulled his cap forward again and drew another shudder from the pipe. "Us not speaking sometimes for weeks on end, and then me getting nothing but a nod or less. I'm not complaining, Mabel, but there's times when I wonder if it occurs to you, in a way of speaking?"

"There's plenty occurs to me, and best not to start mentioning none of it," snapped Mabel. "When I want to know what you've been noticing, Stan Hawkins, I'll ask you. Now the best thing you can do is hurry yourself a bit so I can write to Captain Howland and let him and Mrs. Howland have a date for coming down when all this is finished."

"Talkin' of dates, Mabel, I suppose you wouldn't care to go to the North Siltshire Operatics on Saturday? It's the *Mikado* and I like a bit of music so I took two tickets. We could catch the six-thirty bus into Barleigh."

Stan had certainly caught Mabel's breath, taken it clean away. She wanted to tell him that he'd catch anything, but she simply couldn't get the words out. Besides, such was the aggravatingness of the chap, he might take the slap for encouragement. Him and his two tickets. His bit of music and his Barleigh bus. Was he a lot more artful than anybody guessed? Trying to compromise her by setting the Ringerton hum about them? Mabel flashed him a furious look and then wished she hadn't. Sitting there, blinking over that pipe, for all the world as if he wasn't none too strong in the head, and yet timing the exact moment to meet her eye. She whisked round and flounced out into the garden where she stood, calling for Morris, hoping Stan would come instead when she'd have his answer ready for him. But Stan did not come and the next day George arrived with Morris to inspect the progress of the work. As he was going he mentioned casually that Stan was off on a big job for which the Hawkinses tender had just been

accepted out at Bartonwick. Morris and the boy would finish up at the bungalow and Mabel could let Captain Howland know the place 'ud be clear of 'em in a week's time. That was Stan's doing, decided Mabel, as good as a message he sent her. She tossed her head and stalked round the bungalow, ordering Morris and the boy about and saying what Captain Howland would say when he clapped eyes on the garden. Her annoyance with Stan whipped her up to a peak of self-satisfaction and she enjoyed herself more than ever. That same evening she met little Frank Parks and made him understand the day he had to come in. It was a final touch to her enjoyment when he came as directed. This was on a Friday and she did not write to Paddy until the Sunday evening.

No chance, of course, of Paddy and Percy coming down until the next week-end, and perhaps not till the week-end after. No sense in wasting Frank Park's time for maybe the best part of a fortnight. Percy could play about with the sitting-rooms and bedrooms, be a good thing to get the kitchen and scullery done-and-out-of-the-way. Mabel wondered if she should add a postscript to her letter to that effect but decided against it. On Monday she inspected the whitewash and paint she had ordered for the kitchen and told Frank he could put his back into it and go ahead. It was wonderful how well the little chap got on when he had someone after him all the time. The kitchen and scullery looked real nice by the following Friday when Mabel got a telegram to say Percy was coming down to the Ring of Bells next day. That meant, Mabel decided, on the twelve-forty train; she'd not be likely to take the early one if she hadn't got Paddy with her. Why wasn't Paddy coming? Mabel banished the question along with everything else that could wait and went up to the bungalow to find no Frank, and she had told him to be there; to walk about the place for ten minutes and then suddenly to see Percy opening the garden gate. At sight of Percy Mabel registered a small quirk at the pit of her stomach. She hurried out and made her welcome and asked for Paddy.

"He's fine," said Percy, briefly, on her way into the bungalow, and through it. Right through to the kitchen.

Percy walked on to the middle of the kitchen floor and stood looking round her. Mabel flushed her dark pink and, as Percy said nothing, the pink turned mauvish red.

"You'll be pleased, I'm sure . . ." she was beginning when Frank Parks came trotting in. Percy turned to him.

"You did this? How long will it take you to scrape it off?"

It was one of the nastiest moments Mabel had ever known. Percy strolled about the kitchen talking to Frank as if she wasn't there. She stood by the window watching them, gulping mortification more bitter than anger and as cold as fear. She stared at the back of Percy's head and knew something she refused to admit to herself; Mabel Barter had met her match.

"See what I mean, Bartie?" Percy swung round and asked her casually. "The colour scheme is quite simple but the whole point of it is it must run through the house. Pink walls, deeper pink ceilings dropping down into a frieze above the pale pink. In the living-rooms I'm going to have brown polka dots, those I shall do myself, I've been given some amusing metallic paint. Now let's have a gape at the garden." She went out of the door leaving Mabel and Frank to follow her. Frank had the decency to look at Mabel for permission. She nodded to him and stayed where he was, taking no notice when Percie called "Bartie?" She could have done all the natural things like letting anybody know what she thought, flouncing off, slamming the gate, announcing at the top of her voice that she'd never set foot inside it again but that queer cold feeling warned her. It wouldn't do to have a real row with Percy, Percy carried too many guns and they all seemed to be loaded. As the jabbering in the garden went on she decided to go out and say she was going home to dinner—lunch, and would be back, if needed, late in the afternoon. Then, not waiting for Percy's answer she stepped disdainfully over the last of the plumping debris and hurried away.

Down home she found Het had been called in by Lizzie Marsh, whose poor old mother was dying, at last. The interest of discussing the almost-late Mrs. Marsh's ultimate symptoms and keeping an ear cocked for the passing bell not to mention the comfort of having Doll to herself made Mabel feel much better. After dinner she took a little rest with her feet up and then went up the Barleigh Road, a trifle subdued but refreshed and ready to let Percy know how people could and couldn't treat Mabel Barter. She opened the gate to find Percy crouching on the grass beside a flower-bed, earnestly examining a tuft of dimly variegated leaves. Percy had changed from her travelling suit into the corduroy slacks. She wore them with a sweater the colour of her eyes, and the coat to match them was spread over the grass beside her like a cloak. She spoke without turning her head.

"Do come and look at this, Bartie. I believe it's a plant of dog's-tooth violet."

"What in the world do you know about dog's-tooth violet?" demanded Mabel, really startled.

"Oh, not much. A friend of mine used to take me to all the horti-shows in Town and I learned a bit. If I ever grow old I shall go in for gardening, ex-lovelies always do. This place is in a pretty appalling mess, isn't it? D'you think you could find someone who would flag it? And sink us a lily pond, a square one, I hate the round lozenge-type with silly little impsy-pimpsies sucking their thumbs at the midges on a stone in the middle."

"It 'ud cost you something to do that now, you know."

Percy was silent. Mabel, staring at the back of her graceful neck, felt positive she had meant to say, "Oh, that doesn't matter," and then decided on caution. Mabel twitched. Curiosity fairly broke out over her like prickly heat. Where *did* the money come from? One thing, certain, it couldn't be Percy's own, you could tell by the cut of her that she had a good screw and spent it as soon as she got it.

"Better wait, perhaps," Percy said, suddenly. "But you might be making inquiries, Bartie. Isn't there a monumental mason down by the station? He might save us some scrapped gravestones. I bet there are springs all over this hillside and it would be easy enough to have playing water. You know what I mean," she added, impatiently, and suddenly snatched up her coat and sprang to her feet in one movement. "Come on, let's go into the house and do some more looking round. Wouldn't this be a divine place to have babies in?"

"*Babies?*"

"What's the matter? Did you think they'd never occurred to me?"

"Well, Percy, if you want what I think straight I'll tell you that I felt as good as positive they'd occurred to you all right, and you were making your own arrangements not to have any," Mabel finished up, panting a little.

"Yes, I suppose I do give that impression. Professional women have to, as a matter of fact. No one could sit at an office desk and yearn. Anyway I'm only looking in the shop window at the moment. Do you really remember the days when married women could catch themselves children as a matter of course?"

Mabel repressed her answer. For one thing memory flooded her, sweeping her back to the age of fourteen and the little de Grey's nursery, for another thing she had to admit to herself that Percy chilled response, you couldn't burst out to her as you would to

anyone else. What was more you couldn't trust her not to be trying some game on with you. You didn't know where you were with the young madam, and that was a fact.

"I dessay you're wise," she remarked distantly. "And myself, personally, I should say that it's best for them as haven't had a happy childhood to think twice. Of course it's different for Paddy."

Mabel realized what she had implied, and paused to see how Percy was looking. Percy was looking over her head and whistling vaguely, being rude, of course, but not meaning it. There might be no real harm in the girl. An idea nudged Mabel. Would this be a chance to find out something about her? Curiosity broke out again and she couldn't resist having a try.

"You said you was London, didn't you, dear? Feel like telling me a bit more? Seems queer I don't know nothing about my Paddy's wife. What about your mummy? Did she die young, like poor Mrs. Howland, and leave you?"

"Oh, my God. . . ." Mabel was positive she heard that as Percy whirled round and started the few strides necessary to take her in at the bungalow door. Breathing hard, her face as good as purple, Mabel followed, glaring at the supple shoulder blades in front of her. Turn and go right home was what she ought to do but she couldn't, couldn't for Paddy's sake, she informed herself, knowing quite well that nothing would induce her to make a dramatic departure when Percy wouldn't trouble to turn and see it. She stood in the doorway waiting while Percy strode in and out of the rooms and finally had to come back to her to ask about Frank Parks.

"Couldn't say, I'm sure," Mabel could not repress the snap.

Percy nodded, and the nod obliged her to attend to her hair.

"It doesn't matter actually, because I'm taking a week's holiday and I shall be here until next Saturday. Paddy and I have promised to go down to Kent for the week-end but I may put that off. I can work with little Parks myself."

"You'd better send for Paddy." It was the last suggestion Mabel made.

Percy said nothing, looked nothing and did nothing but she managed to let Mabel know that was the end. A whole week of her, Mabel thought, suddenly. It didn't seem possible, there was something almost alarming at the idea. But it turned out as tame and flat as the back of your hand. Percy was as good as her word. Covered in a painter's coat which had belonged to Frank Park's mother, now dead, she worked on the walls of her bungalow,

stood on planks and even lay on them to do tricky bits of the ceiling. Frank obeyed her like a dog, and produced exactly the right shades of pink thus defeating Mabel's sneaking hope of a hitch. But she couldn't help admiring Percy, the way she worked and the way she stuck to it. She showed no sign of boredom or exhaustion and it was only on the Friday that faint blue marks appeared, decoratively as make-up round her peculiar eyes. The painting was as good as finished, only the kitchen and scullery remained to be done.

"So I shall get off to-morrow, on schedule, pick up Paddy, and go straight down to Kent. See, Bartie, can you watch in the furniture? I've wired them to send it by road on Wednesday. Here's a plan of the rooms with every piece marked in its place. And here's a list of the stuff, all of it described. I've sent duplicates to the overseer who will come down with it, so I don't think anybody can make much of a mistake. When it's in perhaps you can find someone to rub it up a bit, little Parks says his sister wouldn't mind obliging. I don't know just when we shall be down again. Of course I'll write you. Thanks, no end."

Casual and a mystery to the last Percy departed. For the look of things Mabel saw her off at the station and received one of those rare, half-pleading smiles, but only just as the train was pulling out so she could hardly be sure of it, the only certainty was that Percy didn't kiss her good-bye as (once more for the look of things) Mabel rather hoped she would. Mabel walked home to Bell slowly, assembling her intentions ready for presentation to Het and Doll. She'd learned her lesson, she confessed to herself, no use stepping ahead of Percy. Fat lot of use Gladys Purdon, née Parks, would be but better have her in since Percy mentioned it. Of course the real work would be done by herself and Doll, maybe Het if the furniture turned out decent stuff that she wouldn't sniff at after the Derings. Just as well to have those lists, papers always looked important. As long as Percy hadn't sent the overseer chap any private instructions—no, not likely, give the girl her due, she wasn't that sort.

On Wednesday night Mabel came home, scented with straw and packing case and only pretending to be completely exhausted. The stuff was all in and wouldn't look so bad when someone had had a go at it. Wonderful how it fitted into place, the overseer, who seemed a nice fellow said he was quite surprised.

"Be interesting, in a way of speaking, to see it," smirked Het.

"I've asked Doll to come up with me to-morrow," Mabel slapped her down, but added, generously, "Still that's not saying that there's not no reason why you shouldn't come along too."

In the end they all three went, walking in a row as they always did when on an important errand. They paused at the gate to query the bungalow's new name. 'Garth.' Just that. Well, of course, if Percy liked it—and went inside to sniff and open windows and settle down to appraisalment of the furniture.

It was good; if it hadn't been Mabel wouldn't have let Het up the Barleigh Road this morning. Proper antique pieces, the sitting-room looked like a real drawing-room, and Percy's bedroom with the little four-poster bed and a grand small tall-boy was quite a treat. You wouldn't have believed she'd have the taste. Mabel watched Het poking that nose of hers about and was visited by a question which became a twinge. Was it Percy's taste? Was this valuable stuff hers or her father's at all? She had passed off any talk about it in a funny way. The more you looked at it, the more uneasy ideas came to you. Why the stuff, at present-day prices, was worth hundreds, and here it was, left to itself, as you might say. Anybody smelling it out could bring a van one night and cart it all off. With relief Mabel concentrated on the one aspect of the matter with which it was in her power to deal. She must look after Garth and its contents, she decided, make herself responsible, she couldn't do less. She and Doll and Het would take turns to be up at Garth, that would insure the day's safety, but of course the real trouble was the night. The more she thought about it the more worried she felt. She wrote to Percy telling her straight out but the days passed and no letter came in reply. On the evening of the day she had promised herself she'd be sure to hear she fairly got the fidgets. It was a fine, light evening, the first they'd had, and she told Doll as they washed up the supper things together that she thought she'd just step up the Barleigh Road again.

"Dessay I'm only fussing meself but I feel I'd like to make certain about that scullery window. Frank did something silly to it and I don't altogether trust the catch of the bolt," she explained, and made haste to get off before Het came back from a Church Social.

CHAPTER FOUR

OUT of doors it was even lighter than it appeared through glass. Mabel stepped up the Barleigh Road briskly, thinking the whole place looked as if it had been glazed over, treated with something to make it not exactly shine but certainly look quite different to what it did most evenings. Having thus dismissed the peculiar glow which occasionally visits the West Country landscape when it waits on twilight and the rising of a full spring moon, she reflected that it was a funny thing, most evenings you were bound to pass somebody on the Barleigh Road but to-night she hadn't seen a soul and hurried on, frowning over her suspicions concerning the bolt of the bungalow scullery window.

She snapped open the garden gate and stood for a minute inspecting the house and garden. They had their share of the evening glow, the house looked as if tinted with a warm gold and the garden very green, seemed to be rising round it; otherwise they were just as she had left them an hour or two before. She never knew why she suddenly felt positive something had happened.

She snapped the gate behind her and strode up the path. The front door was all right and so were the front windows. She walked round to the back and tested the scullery window with a scowl. She couldn't say that bolt didn't *look* as it should. And then she saw the back door standing wide open. She didn't give herself a second to feel nervous or anything, dashed straight in, and called out:

"Anybody here?"

Silence answered her for a minute or so, then she heard footsteps. The pluck of offence fierily taken was always at her command.

"Ah, I thought so. Come along in and let's have a look at you."

"Certainly." A man entered the kitchen, walked through it and stopped in the scullery doorway. When he stopped, he bowed. Mabel stared at a head of thick grey hair, worn long but cut in a smart way. At a suit that had come from whatever was the best place now, too nippy a waist to it, the sort that draws attention to the swagger of the shoulders above. And then into a long, handsome face, at fine features, a small dramatic scar making a curl in the centre of the left cheek, and, under black brows, extraordinary grey eyes.

"Well," she had to gasp, "I never did. . . . I'd like to know . . ."

"Of course you would, and I want to tell you."

"Don't you trouble yourself. I dunno what you're doing here but I guess I know who you are. Mrs. Howland's, Percy's, pa." It was the wildest shot. For one thing she had more or less made up her mind Percy's father didn't exist, for another this man looked less like a father than anybody she had ever seen. She wasn't in the least surprised when the kind of sneer he wore on his handsome face sprang to a stare and then dissolved into a grin.

"I was just going to say, 'And you are Paddy's famous old nurse,' but of course you cannot be."

"And why not, if you please?"

"It isn't obvious? Ah, then you have got a royal charter for the profession."

"That's neither here nor there," snapped Mabel, beginning to go down to her bewilderment. Anyway there was one thing clear; you'd never pin this chap down, here nor there nor anywhere else. She summoned all her suspicions to give unmistakable meaning to the glare with which she answered his grin. It vanished suddenly, thereby disconcerting her a good deal more than if he had carried on with his impudence.

"I am sorry to appear frivolous. Of course you are Miss Barter who is taking charge of the house for—Paddy and my daughter. I ought to have called on you—Seven, Bell Terrace, isn't it?—on my way up here, but I was in rather a hurry so did not wait to mind my manners. By the way, the latch of that door needs attention."

"It was all right when I left it. Bolted, fast enough."

"Just a jerk, you know, dislocates these simple arrangements. And of course I had to get in somehow." The faintest smirk, shadow of the grin crossed his face and was lost in the most peculiar expression. Mabel had to go on staring at him, she couldn't let him know how he was giving her the creeps. And all the time his eyes getting more and more like Percy's except for the queer look in them. It was to be hoped Percy would never develop that. Mabel could not stop a shiver.

"You are cold. Do come in and let me shut the door. Now, I can offer you a short drink and, of course, a cigarette."

"No, thanks, none of neither." There he was, drawing a flask out of a hip pocket. For all the world like a fancy sort of gangster. The word struck as if she had been trying to remember it all along.

"Really not? Then will you come round the house with me? This is my first visit, and I'm interested. I want to see how the furniture looks."

"Percy said it was yours." Curiosity delivered Mabel from her creeps for a moment.

"I expect you guessed it was my present to her. Dear little girl, I was delighted when she told me she wanted a cottage in the country. And so charming of her to call it 'Garth'."

"Charming? It's a funny sort of name."

"Happens to be mine. 'Dennis' was taken about the time Percy was born so she never used it. Yes, I am really Henry Garth."

They were in the kitchen now. The last thing Mabel wanted was to sit down but her legs fairly gave way under her and she as good as flopped on to a smart high stool. There was a second stool and Henry Garth sat down on it, cleared his throat and lit a cigarette. His cigarette case and lighter were just what you would expect. Mabel's creeps strengthened into a certain conviction.

"I don't wonder, Miss Barter, that you have your doubts about me."

"Don't you?" Mabel paused. He was sharp enough to cut himself, and probably had, often enough, but that was nothing, she'd lay-a-penny, to the way he cut other people. Well, now was as good a time as any other to let him know he couldn't cut her. In a way he couldn't mistake she went on:

"Funny business rather, isn't it? Playing games with the bolt of a door, not calling for me to come and open the place for you although it seems you knew me name and address? How did you get here anyway? Car, I suppose?" Off the tip of her tongue nearly slid, "And with black market petrol in the tank, I bet."

He got up from his stool. She thought he was going to bow to her again in that silly way but his sharpness evidently told him this was the moment to stop fooling.

"Yes, I came in a car. I parked it in that blind lane between the high hedges just up the hill. Percy wanted me to come down and picnic with her at the week-end but I wouldn't accept the invitation much as I should have enjoyed having her to myself for a few days. Technically I am not a good father and I'm always on guard against getting too fond of my daughter." He spoke more and more quietly, at the end his voice was just above a whisper.

"That's a nice thing to say."

He did not pick her up this time. Deliberately taking his eyes from her face he stared down at the lighted tip of his cigarette.

"You've guessed I daresay. I've been in trouble, as it's called. My own fault, of course. Seen the inside of Maidstone jail."

"You've been in prison?"

"I served a six months' sentence some years ago."

"Oh!" said Mabel, and knew, just as though someone had told her, that that wasn't the worst of him. This father of Percy's had hummed her up, like all his kind he was as cute as could be and at the same time too clever by half. He had gone a smart enough way to work, not attempting to allay her suspicions, instead letting her have something she wouldn't care for in words. He thought that would startle and settle her. Silly chap never imagined she would see through him. Six months some years ago. Well, if it was true then he'd probably been lucky. All at once Mabel began to feel excited. She's always had quite a good opinion of herself but never until this moment had she realized that she might be a match for a gangster. She lost a few moments reminding herself how she had found that door open and never hesitated, walked straight in and called him up and told him who he was, let him know he couldn't fool her.

"Before that, before the war, I was in a London set, just like anybody else. I dined several times in parties with the Howlands. That would be when Percy and Paddy were babies. I haven't mentioned it to either of them. Perhaps I ought not to have told you?"

"Makes no difference, I'm sure." Mabel conquered the pang she most likely knew he would cause her. "I dessay you're right enough. Speaking of one thing leads to another, don't it? Does Percy know you've been in prison?"

Well, of all things. She'd never have believed what a simple question like that would do to him. And there he was, kind of wrinking his shoulders losing that slick line of theirs and bending round, his eyes, Percy's eyes, darkening, getting larger and seeming to be starting out of their sockets. Of course he might be putting on an act but still——

"No offence," announced Mabel, airily, "need be taken where none was intended. I quite understand, Mr. Dennis, as I expect you had better be, that there's a certain sore subject, and you can rely on me being the last to say more. An unfort'nate business for all concerned, let's leave it at that. I'm glad you knew Mr. Howland, as nice a gentleman—bar Mr. de Grey who I was with first, and of course quite different, the old style with family—as anyone could wish to meet."

"I liked Howland. I helped him once, for his wife's sake, really, he was a taking little thing. They were running round with a pretty poor crowd one season. I warned Howland and told him he'd better watch his step. If he hadn't taken my advice he'd

have been sorry for it. Incidentally I took a risk when I did it, but, as I say, little Nona Howland appealed to me."

And now it's my turn, Mabel told herself, bravely breasting the wave. Mr. Garth—Dennis—whatever he was, couldn't be making it up. He must have met Mr. and Mrs. Howland; 'Nona', the sauce—but of course in those days everyone called everyone else by their Christian names or nicknames. And Mrs. Howland poor soul, had been rather the silly sort with men, more than silly really. Twenty years ago this Henry Garth chap would have been just what she fancied. Mabel sniffed and decided not to pretend she hadn't. Give the devil his due but no more. He had come up against the Howlands, obviously, but when he criticized their crowd and talked of 'warning Howland', he was going back to a game of his own—possibly the one which had put him in the train for Maidstone.

"Mr. and Mrs. Howland," she began, and then her heart gave a traitorous little flop inside her chest. Here she was, talking to the only person who remembered them and the old days. Might even remember Mr. Howland's trick of humming before he brought out "How d'ye do?" to anyone, and the way he could whistle *Love Nest* and that "In the Spring" song from *Music Box*. And the summer Mrs. Howland had her cape trimmed with monkey fur and that dress, all silk fringe, she came back with from the 'Ace of Spades' dripping wet because some larkie had walked a plank across the swimming pool with her in his arms.

"Seems like yesterday," Mabel went on, abruptly. "I s'pose it's no use asking you——"

Not so much no use as no need. Henry Garth caught her up and began to talk. Wonderful the way he did it, out of that curved thin mouth came an easy flow from which Mabel snatched one or two things she knew were true. She didn't trouble about the rest, it didn't matter. Sentimental heartburn had her in its grip, this father of Percy's knew it and ministered cunningly to the pleasure of pain. He went on talking as he walked with her round the bungalow, smoking, flicking ash, inspecting each piece of furniture, not looking at her, just keeping her at his side, helpless because she had to hear what might come next.

"By the bye, I've got a packet of sandwiches in the car. Would you care to wait a minute while I nip up and get them? I must ask you to share a crust with me after keeping you all this time," he announced when they were back in the kitchen.

Mabel nodded assent. He went off and she heard him running

when he got outside. What did he want her for? Some mischief he was up to. Funny, she had the feeling he was still in the room or watching her from somewhere, she didn't feel free to move or go off and leave him to come back and find her gone. Besides, of course she couldn't do that—couldn't behave silly. The words gave her a prick and she began to come out of her bemusement. When Henry Garth returned he glanced at her, and bowed as he put a small snack basket on the table. She felt almost equal to saying "Finished, have you?" or something like that just to show him, but her attention was distracted by the snack basket. It was a natty little thing, and when he opened it she saw it had been packed by a professional. The stuff that came out was astonishing. Sandwiches, actually of real beef as well as fancy fillings, cheese biscuits, savoury eggs, petits fours, a half-bottle of gin and one of lime.

Henry Garth poured the drinks and raised his glass to her. "Here is to all you deserve, Mabel Barter." Mabel nodded again. She could hardly say, "The same to you," and she had to concentrate on not meeting his eye because she felt if she did she might choke. They stood beside the kitchen table as if they were at a buffet in the middle of a crowd. And perhaps they were, thought Mabel. Henry Garth must be thinking of all sorts of people, and he had certainly called up a lot for her. Of all the creepy fellows. She went back to her original feeling and put her glass down laboring the movement to cover a shiver.

"No, no, thanks. I don't want any more. Nor to eat, neither, much obliged to you. Very tasty, quite a treat in these days," he'd be babbling the same thing over and over in a minute. Now he was really tired she wouldn't be able to get possession of herself again. Yes, she must get away. Of course he saw the way she looked over her shoulder, and naturally he thought he'd play her a bit. He started to say something in that voice of his which sank almost to a whisper but it missed its effect because all of a sudden she felt downright, plain, exasperated.

"I'll be going now. So'll you, I expect. I could wait and shut up after you. We don't want nobody talking. Bad start for Paddy and Percy, that would be." She let him have it.

"No, of course not. Yes, certainly I will go first if that suits you. You'll allow me, won't you, to commend Percy to your care? For Paddy's sake I'm sure you'll look after her, and if you could persuade her to give up the London life and settle here, I should be delighted. There's really no need for her to work."

"Same thing struck me. Plenty of money round her, it seems. This place, now——"

"This place now. Delightful for young marrieds, ideal. They owe it to you, I believe? I wish you would let me—but I know you won't. However I will ask you for a promise to get into touch with me if any situation should arise calling for more than you care to take on. I'm sure we quite understand each other. Here's my card, you'll see the address it gives is my club, I've always been a member of the Bruton. Resigned once, of course, but Sir Andrew Farleigh was good enough to manage my re-election. By the bye, you know the Derings? He was a good fellow, wasn't he?"

"I never had no call to talk of gentlemen as good fellows and I don't see no reason to start now. My sister, Henrietta, could speak as she found, her being in private service with them, as no doubt well you know, and wonderful it is how you don't seem to have forgotten a thing." Now Mabel found she could glare at him as he deserved. The Derings. Whoever next? But she wasn't going to stay and find out. She had had more than enough. She flounced round and sent her parting shot backwards. "Guess I'll leave the shutting up to you, after all. If you can't manage it with your fingers better try your tongue. Bolt a door inside from out with that, I reckon. No, I won't take your card. I'm not asking for trouble, nor giving no promise to get into touch with none."

The impetus of her flounce carried her out of the door right down the path and she only hoped he caught her last words, they were too good to be wasted. She slammed the garden gate, and the instinct of caution warned her that she'd made noise enough to travel to the nearest houses, but she tossed her head at the chance and taking the middle of the Barleigh Road hurried down it. Let anybody hear what he liked, he wouldn't catch the quarter of what she had this evening. Why, she knew the truth about Percy's father! Not only that but, brass as he was, she knew where he kept a soft spot. He'd never let on to Percy that he'd told her—— The conviction gave Mabel such a thrust of excitement that she had to stand still for a minute. She'd got a hold over Percy. Let the young woman behave as cool and who's-on-top-now as she liked, she'd better look out. At any moment Mabel could turn round and tell her——

"Why, wherever have you been, Mabe?" demanded Doll, giving Mabel a start because in the darkness she hadn't seen her leaning over Seven, Bell's gate.

"Ask me *what* I've been and not *where*, and p'raps I'll tell you.

busy, that's what I've been, my girl, found a lot to do up at the ungalow," stated Mabel, airily. She quite surprised herself at the calm way she carried it off because there was always the danger with Doll being her favourite sister that she might blurt things out to her. A good night's rest reinforced her excitement instead of dissolving it and she came down to breakfast wearing the expression of inflammable self-satisfaction known in the Barter family as 'looking very conscious'.

Het, however, was looking very conscious, too. She had a letter open being read to Doll, a second sheet of it propped ostentatiously against the cup waiting for Mabel. As Mabel came in she coughed and quite obviously, read a sentence over again.

"I felt I must write to you. It's nice to be in London although I got a shock when I went to our house yesterday. The Government seems to have torn up most of the floors, clawed down the wall-papers and bitten cornices off the ceiling. You wouldn't know it, and I am thankful Sir Edward was spared the sight. Of course Camilla is enjoying herself. I am going to present her at the first Royal Garden Party, did I tell you?"

"Wouldn't have forgotten to mention it if she had, would you, Het?" Mabel simply couldn't help slipping that in. The aggravating girl. Het just lifted her nose in the air and went on:

"I am staying at my club for the present and Camilla is with friends I may take a furnished service flat for a few weeks. Everything is terribly expensive and there's Combe eating its head off but I must give Camilla a little fun, although my trustees start shaking their heads as soon as I get inside their offices. However, I hope to sell the Belgrave Square house, some charity organization has made an offer for it when the Government lets go. I thought of you yesterday when I . . . h'm, h'm . . . If you can possibly manage to come over to Combe when we . . . that's about all."

"Nuff, too, with the half of it made up, I shouldn't wonder," muttered Mabel, trying to catch Doll's eye. It was a bit too much, coming down feeling full of herself, ready to let the two girls know she didn't intend to tell them, and have Het showing off like this. Yes, but what 'ud she say if she heard about Henry Garth knowing the Derings? Mabel was savouring the spicy question when she saw Het slitting another envelope with her knife, and thinking so you longed to pick up the teapot and throw it at her.

"I've heard from Tess."

The kitchen clock ticked several times before anyone spoke.

Tess always, or nearly always, wrote to Mabel. She was Mabel's girl as she couldn't be Het's or Doll's because of Dick having been Mabel's boy. The Barthers, with their passion for playing family touch-last observed and could be scared by the rules of the game. Acknowledgment of one now circled the table. Tess had best have sent her letter to Mabe.

"Read us what she says, Het," suggested Doll, sharply.

"'Tisn't so very much." Het knew when the whistle had gone, and answered Doll as sharply. "Just:

"Dear Auntie Het,

This is to say Mum sends her love and could you finish that jumper for her to my size if not too much trouble because she is giving it to me. The Ministry here is sending me up to London for a six weeks' course. I go next week to stay in a hostel our Miss Maynard's sister runs and she says is ever so nice. Aren't I lucky because I terribly wanted to go and after all only one other girl from Templeford is chosen. Dad's and the boys' and my love to you and Auntie Mabel and Auntie Doll.

From Tess.

P.S. Thursday it is I go."

"Well, now, did you ever?" As there was no doubt about Het having read the letter straight Doll favoured her with the proper comment on it. "You knowed about Tess most likely going, didn't you, Mabe?" she added.

"Of course I knowed. She told me the minute I . . ."

"Seems like everybody is going to London," put in Het, not able to wait a minute for a person to finish what she had to say. Mabel gave her the family glare, a look from which no one but a Barter would ever have recovered. It held unwaveringly and then suddenly went out, almost winked out, in a smirk.

"Told me the minute I told her I should be going up meself in May," announced Mabel, in a voice to cover any babble. "Seeing how Susan is always asking me to stay with her in Fulham and as long as I like, which is a change, I must say, from the way some people go on, I'm naming no names, that's quite understood, and what I'm after, really, of course, is my Paddy." Emotion threatened Mabel's voice and she had to raise it again. "Should you'd like to send a message, Het, I shall be writing to Tess. If Thursday suits her it'll suit me, and I guess there'll be a weight took off young Dick's mind if he knows we're going together."

CHAPTER FIVE

MABEL went up to London in a very different mood to the one in which she had travelled to Paddy's wedding. As she would have put it herself she now knew where she was. In front of her was something with which she felt able and eager to cope, practically all her tremors were behind her, and in her possession was the truth about Henry Garth, she'd have to be precious careful to say 'Mr. Pennis' when he was mentioned. And opposite her, absorbed in the *Daily Mirror*, was Tessa. Mabel settled her shoulders as she always did and stared at Tess's bent head in a way that would have raised any other girl from her paper. Tess merely turned a page and became more absorbed than ever. Mabel folded her everely-gloved hands over the bag on her lap and frowned in critical affection. Every time she saw the child there was an improvement of some sort in her, either looks, bearing or manner. Wonderful how she dressed, and managed that assurance of hers, cool as an ice-cone, not a bit afraid of being in London.

"Tess?"

"Yes, Auntie?"

"Pull the window right up, will you, dear? I dessay the gentleman won't mind."

The gentleman, a nondescript youth, with the usual horn-rimmed face and stylo in his pocket, sprang up and dealt with the window. Been waiting for the excuse, of course, wanted to talk to Tess. They exchanged smiles and his *Express* and her *Mirror*, then settled down to read as before but Mabel registered a change in the atmosphere of the carriage. Oh, these modern young people understood each other all right. Mabel was the one to fidget and not be able to give her attention to the *Telegraph* which was what she had bought, it being the paper she elected to 'hold with' and meant to make Tess read presently. Having Tess with her was evening her up and doing her good, but as is generally the way with benefits, it did something else as well. Tess was a challenge, the casual gracious young dignity of her an intimate exasperation. Mabel found herself fuming suddenly. This trip would learn Tess, she had a lot too much her own way at home, bossing her brothers and twisting her dad round her little finger. She'd find her level in a crowd, in a hostel. What made her so keen on that hostel? Susan had asked her to stay in Reddle Road and she wouldn't. Perhaps she'd be sorry in a day or two, and come. A glance at Tess

convinced Mabel that, even if sorry she wouldn't come. Sometimes it crossed her mind that a shaking might not hurt Tess. . . . Then she was swept by quite painful shame of her angry and conspicuously useless reflections. She shook the *Telegraph* and turned to stare out of the window. The swaying countryside struck her as looking in a proper mess, trees fallen and lying crooked all anyhow, gates and hedges showing the sort of Government we'd got now, one or two enormous vans trying to get through narrow lanes, silly as a cuckoo in a hedge-sparrow's nest. Fair disgusted with it all Mabel settled down to criticize the carriage she was in, the train, the trains they passed, the stations dad wouldn't have recognized, the shocking shabbiness everywhere, trucks that looked as if they'd never stand up to coupling, and, worst of all, the Dear Old Company's initials fading out all over the place. It gave her a lump in her throat and the lump became charged with electricity. A general bellicosity invigorated her to snorting point, and she felt as ready for London as Tess. London, had it known it, better look out.

The bustle of Paddington and the pleasure of taking Tess down into the Underground and showing her how to board the sort of train she had never seen before soothed her to a warm simmer pricked with bubbles of enjoyment and suspicion. She walked young Tess from the station to Reddle Road not, as she explained, because she didn't know the right number of bus to take, but because it would get Tess her London legs. Several times she asked, "Not tired, are you, my dear?" and overlaid the answer with more metropolitan information. As a matter of fact, Mabel admitted to herself, it was quite a walk from the bottom of Reddle Road to the top where Susan Willis lived with a friend in a nice little house that had just missed the bombing. Susan was one of the lucky ones. She and her friend had been in service with a lady who behaved as once ladies could; at her death she had left her faithful maids nice little annuities. During the 1914 war she had been in Scotland and Susan took a temporary post with the de Greys. Only six months she and Mabel lived together and at the time Mabel hadn't really thought so much of her, but somehow they had kept up ever since and there wasn't anyone Mabel looked forward to seeing more than Susan.

"I was just expecting you, Mabe," announced Susan now, coming to her front door with the kind of smile which makes the house look as if it is smiling too. She welcomed Tess ever so nicely, you could see she was struck with the girl, and Mabel's gratified family pride put quite a smack into the kiss she gave good old Susan.

"I've dinner just ready to dish up, come along in, and you won't have to wait but a minute. Winnie's away staying with her brother that's had that stroke at Walthamstow."

Funny thing about Winnie, she generally was away somewhere when anybody called and always when Mabel came to stay. In fact Mabel had only caught sight of her once or twice, one of those who haven't more'n half a word to say for themselves and look for all the world like what you'd pull off a sprouting potato. Still she seemed to suit Susan all right and had contributed some nice things to their home. There was an upright piano with a handsome velvet cloth over the top, young Tess kept on looking at it, she'd always wanted to learn to play but Dick had put his foot down, pity in a way.

"Tell Susan all about this course of yours and how you're getting on with your Ministry," directed Mabel, proudly. "Civil Servant that's what she is, Susan, you and me was the same once, I reckon, but we never got no title out of it."

Tess spoke up so well, and made her Ministry sound so interesting they sat over dinner longer than they might have done, and Tess suddenly stopped in the middle of a sentence, jumped up and said she'd have to be going.

"That hostel of yours can wait," protested Mabel.

"Yes, Auntie, but I've got to meet Audrey in Bedford Square at half-past three. We are going to look round a bit and then go to our place for instructions at four."

"'Our place.' Did you ever? And what d'you know about getting to Bedford Square? Lucky you've got me. . . ."

"Yes, Auntie, I'm terribly lucky and you'll see I'll be absolutely all right."

Mabel could hardly credit it. Seemed Tess was determined to go off by herself. Flabbergasted, no less, Mabel choked over her cup of scalding hot tea while Tess told Susan just how she was going to take a bus—she'd seen the number on lots passing her and Auntie as they walked here—back to the station and then by Underground and Tube. Audrey had a map and they had planned just where to meet. Then she'd come back to her hostel which was in Pimlico. That wasn't too far away, was it?

"In all my born days I never," gasped Mabel, when Tess was safely out of the house, half way up the Reddle Road, no doubt, because she started to run as she sprang off the doorstep.

"Come along back in Mabe, and have another cup," said Susan, shutting the door quickly. She took hold of Mabel's elbow and

propelled her along the little passage into the kitchen. Once in the kitchen she stood for a minute to look shrewdly at Mabel, through the spectacles she hadn't had to wear last time they met. "No use getting in a fan-tod, old dear. They will do that sort of thing, the young monkeys. Come to any harm? 'Course she won't. Got her head put on with an extra screw by the look of her, I'd say. Handsome is as handsome does, and you can take that two ways."

"I s'pose you'd call Tess good-looking. Not but what at her age Doll was a lot taller and had lighter hair, almost yellow it was." Mabel obeyed an instinct to switch the subject, but Susan, showing a certain saucy dimple she had always had in her right cheek, shook her head.

"Fat lot of use pretending you don't think she's a daisy. You're right to. I never saw a nicer girl. But, take my advice, Mabe, don't try and nurse her else she'll be giving you the slip. 'Course I know how you are feeling. Half the time you want to kiss her and the other half slap her. Neither of it'll do any good, not being what a girl wants, and what she wants is all she's after."

"You was always one to see through a brick wall even before you put on those specs of yours," retorted Mabel, but Susan's dimple went out and she shook her head again, gravely.

"You've had your share of being hurt, I know, Mabe, and most of it came through letting your feelings run away with you. When you was fond of anybody you fair idolized them, and that's asking for trouble. Now seeing you brought up your tea ration I'm going to make us some fresh, there isn't a drop left in this pot. Tell me about Paddy getting married. I guess you were glad although in a way you must have felt losing him."

Susan *was* a good sort, decided Mabel. Nobody like her to understand. She continued to be warmly sympathetic while the kettle came to the boil and the comfort of nearly black tea brimmed in their cups. By the time the cups were empty of all but stain Mabel found herself changing her tune a little. She had started by telling Susan that she'd have to hurry, she wanted to get to Paddy's flat to be there when he came back from the office, and how she'd planned to surprise him to-morrow by going down to the City and popping in on him as she had once on Mr. Howland. Susan didn't say much but she managed to let Mabel know that she didn't think much of the first part of her scheme and nothing at all of the second part. Mabel, thus tactfully treated, reconsidered it herself. She didn't really 'notice' Susan making a suggestion and presently remarked that it might be as well to take it easy for the

est of the day and, to-morrow being Friday, pass it quietly with Susan, they'd certainly plenty to talk about and it would be nice to go over to Battersea and see Mrs. Nash who had been cook at the de Greys when they were there, maybe go to the Fulham Road Forum for the six-thirty house if it had a good picture showing. Saturday, of course, would be best for Paddy, to make sure she'd phone him this evening. After that they settled down and remained settled until it was time to go out to miss the queue at the green-grocers. By then Mabel had talked herself into the position she had prepared for Susan's benefit, and when she came back from the telephone call box at the corner successfully concealed the fact that she couldn't get an answer from Paddy's flat. The next morning she slipped out and tried again, this time to be greeted by the female voice of the type Tess sometimes tried to put on and told that the flat was subbed.

"Snubbed?"

"Subbed. Sub-let. Do you want Percy Howland? Actually, he's taken something on the river in Chelsea. What's the address, Fran? Sixty, Swan Parade. I believe there's something funny about the entrance. You have to hunt it up, No, only a week or two. Yes, her husband's there with her."

"I should hope so," muttered Mabel, relieving her ear of the receiver and glaring balefully at the instrument which had held that voice and its news. She'd go down to Sixty, Swan Parade first thing to-morrow morning. Susan nor no one should stop her. She didn't like the sound of this at all.

Mabel had always mistrusted Chelsea. In her early days with the Howlands their wildest parties, the ones Mrs. Howland never subscribed to her afterwards, had always been held there. She sat in her bus, frowning all the way, and got out at Chelsea Town Hall with every suspicion sharpened. She hurried along, her old London street-sense directing her so that she did not have to ask anybody. Swan Parade wasn't where she expected but she found it and what was more found the door of Sixty in Punter's Alley and a corner and inside a small yard. Sixty wasn't a block of flats, it was an old-fashioned, grimy corner house which looked as if it ought to have been bombed instead of many better ones. Mabel thought she knew its sort so she didn't bother to look for the bell, just turned the door-knob and was going to step inside when a wheezy voice behind her said:

"Now, then, you a reg'lar?" and she looked round to see a real Chelsea char grinning at her.

"I should 'ope not in a place like this," snapped Mabel. "You work here, I s'pose? I want Captain and Mrs. Howland."

"And they want me, whatever they do about you," retorted the char with a wheeze which ended in a cough that raked Punter's Alley's echoes. "Only come in on Saturday as a favour, and my old man he doesn't half create because I do. Starts as soon as he gets home on Friday night. Wouldn't let me come at all, if he knew—but what I say is their money's as good as anybody else's, and sometimes a bit better. If you haven't been here before you'll need someone to show you the way up to the top."

And so Mabel had to go in with the old char. In and up a house such as she recognized only too well and told herself she had never seen the like of. House agents would no doubt describe it as divided into maisonettes, but the division was of the most informal character and the first sign of it Mabel saw was a dirty imitation tapestry curtain slung across the hairpin crook of an upper flight of the horrid stairs.

"Cap'n and Mrs. H. got their bedroom and a sitting-room next and above that's the kitchen with bath and the study-ho. These stairs fair wind you, don't they?" wheezed the char, settling her hat which was obviously of the type that remains on the head all day. Mabel could bear no more without satisfaction of some kind. She pushed the char aside and hurried on to sweep back that nasty curtain. Then she inspected the two doors in front of her and darted at the one she felt pretty sure wasn't the bedroom. As she reached it it opened and Paddy stood there in his pyjamas, shrugging into a Paisley dressing-gown, his hair standing up all over his head, nothing of his face showing but his mouth, even his eyes lost in a vast yawn.

"Yes, I remember you having your tonsils out without you showing me your throat like that. Well, Paddy, how's the boy?" demanded Mabel, summoning all her bravado for the sake of the char, there behind her. "All right for me to come in?" she added, in a swift whisper.

"Bartie?" Paddy fought his yawn which left tears in his eyes. "Oh, hullo, Mrs. Kidd? Splendid. Can you start with the studio? I'll catch my bath and then you can do the kitchen. Bartie, it's amazing to see you. You didn't write or anything, did you?"

"No, I meant to surprise you. Seems I've surprised myself. This is a queer place to find you, Paddy. Where's Percy?"

"As a matter of fact she's still asleep. We were out on a party last night and stayed late. I had this morning off from the office

and Percy's taking her one Saturday in three, too. I'm afraid the place isn't extra tidy but Mrs. Kidd will doll it up before she goes, eh, Mrs. Kidd?"

"That's right," agreed the char, clambering heavily up the last flight to the top of the house. She might have been an elephant trampling and it was absurd of Paddy to whisper like he did as if Mabel was making a noise.

"Be better when we get off these stairs," she hinted, grimly. "This the sitting-room? Oh, my . . ."

It was, she told herself, rushing ahead of what it might be judicious to decide, the worse place she had ever seen. Might have been a cheap lodging house with all the dust-impressed upholstery of old rep-covered furniture, dirty wallpaper, a frizz of rubbish on brackets and an old guy of a console, a sofa right down one side in the bow window with its view of the river.

Paddy picked up a cushion from the floor and threw it at the sofa; he pushed two chromium cigarette boxes into prominence on the mantelshelf and rolled a smart trolley bearing a little glass tank holding mother-of-pearl water lilies out of the shelter of the console.

"Sit down and look at the river. We were astoundingly lucky to get this place. Percy nabbed it from under the noses of some Jews who would have paid anything. She happened to drop in at a picture show where they were bribing the old girl who owns it. We got a good offer for a two-month's let of our own flat from some South Africans. So we took it. People shift around all the time these days."

"So it seems." Mabel ignored the bow window full of sparkling spring river and looked instead at the sofa. She had always had a peculiar power of condemnation by inspection; many were the housemaids who had tried to sauce her and carry off untouched dust but ended by wilting while Mabel just looked. She might worship the ground Paddy trod on but she was going to let him know that the carpet hadn't had a proper sweep for months, if ever. "So it seems," she repeated as if she once more wore a cap and a black one at that. "And from better to worse by the sight of it. Paddy, what ever made you demean yourself by coming to a house like this?"

"Oh, Bartie, look here——"

"Which is the identical thing I'm doing, son. I'd never have believed it, you having been brought up like you was, that bungalow home full of real good stuff, don't tell me there's any need for it,

with you and Percy both earning and her so easy with money, too," out it all came in a fine jumble but Paddy would know what she meant.

"We like it, Bartie. It's all so sentimental and restful, the old girl who's an artist has lived in it for years and she has left something, definitely something, behind her."

"I should say she had and that Mrs. Whatsit hasn't never so much as tried to clean it up."

"Shoosh for pete's sake, she may hear you and leave us in the lurch, they are as rare as dodos these days. Percy can't do the work herself. . . ."

"I should like to watch her try. Wouldn't hear much about sentimental and restful then, that's her, of course, putting you up to talking nonsense. Your dear dad may have liked his bit of silliness but what he'd say to this . . ."

"Oh, holy smoke! . . ."

A second door which Mabel hadn't noticed opened and, in a square of light that showed you how dingy the room was, there stood Percy, her shining black hair sweeping round her head in great loose waves, her eyes wide as a just-waked child's, a plain soft-blue silk wrapper setting her off like a picture, you couldn't deny it. Mabel did not attempt to deny it, but as the thought struck her she bounced up from the sofa. Paddy, dragging himself free of an entanglement with his dressing-gown cord, hurried up after her.

"Damn, darling, I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't, Mrs. Kidd did. Hullo, Bartie, grand to see you here. Isn't it a witching place?"

If she'd had time, as Mabel assured herself over and over, going back in the bus, she'd have carried right on from what she'd told Paddy. It wasn't that she was scared of Percy, a chit like that, even with those looks and being so tall, that blue thing making her seem even taller, it was just that she was a bit taken aback and wouldn't risk an upset because she saw Paddy was nervous, and most likely with good reason.

"Well, I suppose some might call it so. How are you, Percy?"

"I'll know as soon as I really wake up. Paddy, d'you dare go and make us some coffee? Then for pete's sake have your bath or Mrs. Kidd won't do the tub. Light the fire first, it's cold in here."

"I'll light the fire," snapped Mabel. It was more than she could stand hearing Paddy ordered about like that.

"Thanks," said Percy, coolly, and came across the room to curl down on the sofa and watch her do it. One moment there she was as good as touching the ceiling, and the next nothing but a blue wreath among the shabby cushions. Mabel produced matches from her bag and lit the gas fire which popped and smelt, one of those.

"Cigarette, Bartie? If you'd bring across one of those boxes on the mantelpiece? Fine. You haven't seen all the place yet, have you? The studio is above this and it's pretty marvellous, with a little balcony that makes you feel as if you were being blown over the river on a kite. All our friends adore it, they simply force us to give parties."

"Then you're not bothering about the bungalow?"

"I'm longing to get down to it but things are pretty hectic just now," drawled Percy. Mabel waited, expecting at least thanks for all the trouble she had taken and inquiries as to who was keeping an eye on Garth while she was away. Just as she was going to let Percy know it Paddy came in with two cups of terrible slopped coffee, you couldn't blame the dear boy, he'd never had that sort of thing to do as a child like some.

"How's Mrs. Kidd getting on?" asked Percy, all the drawl gone out of her voice.

"She's behind the easel in that corner of the studio; I believe she'll have it down in a minute and then it will probably go into just as those picture frames did. . . ." The glance they exchanged was not lost on Mabel. One up on Percy at last. She coughed and broke in:

"Don't you worry about no easels, Paddy. Have your bath and if it's a geyser mind and not blow yourself up, nasty dangerous things to my way of thinking. Yes, thank you, son, I'm quite comfortable here. Go on, Percy, and tell me some more about these parties."

"You can't tell about parties, really. In a way they are always rather a mess." Percy spoke quite seriously, apparently she hadn't noticed Mabel's tone. "And of course an awful lot of trouble but he doesn't mind when it's worth it to people. We had young Camilla Dering to our last."

"How'n the world did you come by Camilla?"

"Oh, we've met her about. She and Paddy are rather friends."

"I wouldn't get encouraging Paddy to be friends with girls if I were you. He's good as gold, that's clear as sunlight but with young men . . ."

"He's married so he has to look over the hedge if he wants to be a young man. I hate to see him peeping that's why I encourage him. If you call it encouraging. Bartie, you must come to our next party. How long are you going to be up?"

"I haven't in a way of speaking, quite decided."

"Come to supper to-morrow night? We'll go round to the Polka Dot. Of course Paddy and I have to go on some place afterwards but . . ."

"No, Percy, thank you. I'll wait for Paddy to suggest something himself. No knowing what the dear boy really wants if he's got nothing to do but say 'Yes' to your arrangements. That reminds me, howd'you manage about his mending these days?"

"Well——"

"I thought as much. Then, if it isn't too much trouble for you to collect I'll take a parcel of the worst back with me. Here's a sheet of paper and some string I brought along in case you shouldn't have none handy."

Percy sat there for a minute, not moving, then she dropped her cigarette into her wet saucer and got up and went back into her bedroom. Mabel gave up trying to drink the coffee and sat listening to as queer a lot of noises as ever she had heard. Bumps from above that made the ceiling shake and creak, a gusty howling and hissing from the water pipes serving the bath, a peculiar snapping that she felt positive was the geyser threatening to explode, and a tempest of banging, squeaking cupboard doors and drawers as Percy hunted up Paddy's underclothes. Percy came back with a pair of pants over one shoulder, a shirt over another and socks dripping from her hands. She was wearing a fresh mouth, Mabel observed, so she hadn't given up all her time to doing a little for her husband.

"Don't bother with them if you don't want to. Actually I was going to take the shirt to a mending shop that has just been opened in the King's Road. The pants are past all panting anyway, one of us tried to air them in front of a gas-fire and they got too close. The socks seem rather . . ."

"Give 'em to me just like they are." Mabel whisked the sorry woollen shower bouquet out of Percy's hands and rolled it passionately. Holes winked at her as she whipped the paper round it, a nice job she'd got in front of her and if it was only to save Percy trouble——

"I've got some cards of mending somewhere."

"Better lettuce have them although I don't s'pose for a minute

they are anywhere near a match for nothing. I'll have to see what I can find for myself. Well, now, if this is all——?" She could hear a violent gushing which probably meant Paddy's bath water running out but she didn't really feel she could wait any longer just to catch sight of him under Percy's thumb. "I'll let you have these back as soon's I can, tell Paddy, with my love, my dear love. Sorry to have inconvenienced you on your Saturday morning, I'm sure."

Percy didn't say, "That's all right". She didn't say anything. A funny girl if ever there was one. Sometimes she couldn't take a hint as broad as a bean and sometimes she seemed almost as if she was waiting for you to do what you didn't know yourself you were going to. Now she might have been waiting for that spurt of temper.

"I'd learn her if I had much to do with her," Mabel assured herself, glaring wrathfully at the slight, graceful round of the back view of the blue wrapper while Percy hunted for the mending in a drawer of a little old-fashioned davenport desk. She nearly forgot herself, snatching the cards and hurried out of the sitting-room, tossing a "good morning" over her shoulder and making as much noise as she could going downstairs so that she should not know if Percy called after her or not. By the time she had nearly fallen headlong owing to catching her heel in torn linoleum and found that the door which opened so easily from outside played all manner of tricks from in, she was almost bursting with temper and had to wait a minute to let Swan Parade stop sizzling in front of her eyes. Then she stuffed the mending cards into her bag and decided she couldn't go back to Fulham and Susan's chatter. What about taking a bus at the Town Hall and going up Vest? Having a look at the familiar sights and lunch at a Corner House? Perhaps she'd drop in at Lady Dering's club and see if she was there.

The last idea fascinated Mabel. In the old days she had often been to both Mr. and Mrs. Howland's clubs and prided herself on the way she tackled puffed-up hall porters and superb head waiters. The smell of good old London once again in her nostrils she felt quite equal to being her self of fifteen years ago. The bus she boarded at Chelsea Town Hall got into block after block and made her feel she could have managed it far better herself. Thus finally fortified against any qualm she walked briskly through a Mayfair of which she hadn't forgotten a single turning and up the steps of the Ladies' Ruton Club.

The Ladies' Bruton was full of a bustle that wouldn't have been permitted once upon a time. Women were shouting to each other in the hall and the porter, compared with a lost tribe, was a poor-looking fellow, obviously unable to awe either members or staff. Mabel summed him up as she gave him the name. A page-boy who wasn't a boy but a long-legged gawk who couldn't fix his own hair properly said he thought Lady Dering was in the club.

"Better go and find out, hadn't you?" snapped Mabel, prepared to tell anybody that she remembered London when it was very different to this. She was slightly soothed by the sight of Lady Dering, very smart in a black town suit, white violets in the button-hole and a tiny hat with a floating veil, coming towards her, smiling, "Why, Mabel?" not a bit surprised. She suddenly remembered a saying of Mrs. de Grey's old mother's. "It always strikes me as quite ill-bred to show amazement in public," and had a moment's genuine pleasure thinking that the old lady would have approved of Lady Dering.

"No, I haven't an appointment for half an hour and then it isn't too important. Come into the lounge and have coffee with me," she invited Mabel, taking her along.

"No coffee, thank you, 'm," exclaimed Mabel, assailed by the memory of poor little Paddy's slop in the saucers. "But it'll be ever so nice to sit with you while you have a cup if you are wanting one. Very well you are looking, 'm. London agreeing with you. I dessay there's a good time going still for those who know where to find it."

"I'm sure there is but one has got to be Camilla's age. The pace of things now rattles one's birthdays at one."

"You mustn't say that, 'm. How's Camilla? I've just been hearing about her."

"You've been down at Percy's? Isn't it a charming place? Camilla goes there quite a lot and raves about it. I believe she spent last week-end there. They put up a bed in the corner of the studio."

"Good gracious alive! . . ."

"Yes, I was faintly startled when I heard about it. At the moment I am giving Camilla her head so only suggested that the sleeping question has always been ticklish. People like Percy are liable to trip up and find themselves in the Divorce Court and then other people like charwomen pop up and make the most innocent arrangements appear dubious."

"I'm sure there's not the slightest fear of Paddy . . ."

"Not the least, I should say; Percy will see to that as long as he takes the trouble but I believe she turns Paddy out occasionally to wander about, and he is liable to sit down anywhere to smoke a cigarette. Not that Camilla actually told me, I think she was a trifle scared, I mean. I hope so in a way, beds being beds."

"Of all the . . ." Mabel put her hand to her mouth and managed a cough. Then she was suddenly overpowered by a longing to confide in Lady Dering; it wouldn't do, of course, she could only give her a hint. "You'll pardon me, I'm sure, 'm, if I pass the remark, nothing more whatever intended, but if so be'd Paddy'd met a girl like your Camilla first things mightn't have been so easy for him. When I say 'easy', the word I'm thinking of is 'slippery'. Paddy might have been a lot better, and happier if he'd had to work for his wife, and if his wife hadn't been a widow and goodness knows what else, though of course that's not to say I'm against Percy really. It's just that one feels . . ."

"I quite understand, Mabel. Of course you took his parents' place for Paddy."

Now what did Lady Dering mean by that? The tone of her was funny and the way she rolled down her eyelids and left her face blank as a sheet of paper. What did she know about Mr. and Mrs. Howland? Of course, in the early days there had been talk about no one, as far as Mabel knew, had ever suggested that either his dad or his mummy hadn't been devoted to Paddy. She stared hard at the blank face. No use picking on anybody like Lady Dering. Of course Mrs. Howland dying when she did and then Mr. Howland—Lady Dering must be thinking of that, she wasn't the sort to make up anything else, not even if she knew it. . . . Mabel achieved another cough and started on the familiar road which would conceal no danger.

"Yes, Paddy was my boy all right. Tored the heart out of my breast for him I would, and will still. Never seen anyone like him or expect to, and if you'll forgive me, 'm, putting of myself forward being the last thing I'd do as I'm sure you well know, but the mention you made of the Divorce Court rather bothered me. Percy lost her first husband quite proper and she may not be that either you or me'd chose but I'm sure she's devoted to Paddy. What else could she be? And any kind of scandal would be so shocking bad for the boy, makes me creep all over to think of it. What I'm trying to say is, best not suggest no divorces. Percy being the sort that take an idea into her head and you don't know what she'd do."

"I entirely agree," said Lady Dering, still keeping her lids down. There she sat, the little veil on her hat blowing about, cool as anything while Mabel began to feel quite hot and sticky with botheration. She might never have no peace now, going back to this; in fact she didn't know that she'd ever forgive Lady Dering for worritting her, and a fat lot of difference that would make to Lady D.

What did she actually know about Percy? Had there been silly gossip from Camilla? Or was it just that she was, underneath, all the time, one to look down her nose?

Mabel decided to echo, "I entirely agree, 'm," and rose from the depths of a great club chair to stand with severe dignity at her full height, which was two or three inches more than Lady Dering's. Lady Dering had to get up to say good-bye to her so the whole room noticed. Mabel shook hands with a generous display of wrist work and went out to find the Mayfair sunshine quite dazzling. She moved off the Ladies' Bruton steps in case of anyone looking at her as if she was in the way and stood beside one of the entrance pillars blinking, and turning her head about to decide how to go to Oxford Street and the nearest Corner House. And then she saw him come out of the gent's Bruton Club next door. Dressed in a grey lounge suit that made you glance at his eyes at once, the jet-black brows and the scar on his cheek both looked as if a beauty specialist had been at them, but still what held you was those eyes. And they recognized her at once.

"Good morning, Miss Barter," he took off his hat with a sweep and called out from the top of gent's Bruton's steps. Did he know that would make her act as she did? She turned and fairly ran along the pavement and round the first corner, away from him. Of all the great sillies—or was it the best thing she could have done? Whatever would he have said to her? What would she have found to say to him? Awkwardness couldn't have been avoided. Still now she was round the corner she hated to think she might have played his game for him.

It spoiled her lunch for her. Corner Houses held happy recollections having once been among her and Paddy's treats, but to-day she could only fidget with her food and with her thoughts, going over what she might have said, irritating herself to such a point that she was obliged to reconstruct her interview with Lady Dering and bring it more to her advantage. When the waitress, after having been far from attentive, asked "Coffee?" she glared at her and with the utmost difficulty kept back a snap account of all the

exations to which coffee had been an accompaniment this morning. She pushed a threepenny bit, one of those nasty, silly-shaped things, under her plate, and stalked down the big room, receiving several glances which held a modern version of respect and might at another time have mollified her, but now she was too far gone for that. Feeling tired, a final exasperation, she made her way back to Fulham with all the traffic roaring at her. A bus up the Reddle Road just eluded her and she had to walk the length of the dratted street and arrived as good as beat to find Susan and Fessa sitting in the kitchen as comfortable as anything, enjoying cups of tea.

"Hullo, Auntie?" said Tess. "I say, you are marvellous."

"What d'you mean by 'marvellous'?" demanded Mabel. "Can't anyone go about London on their own except you? Yes, I've done all I set out to do, Susan, and a bit more. Called at the Ladies' Bruton to see Lady Dering and had lunch. Went up to Oxford Street after." She hadn't intended to put it like that but now it had come out it might as well stay. "How've you been getting on, Tess?" she added, very cool, but not, she hoped, exactly spiteful. Dumping her bag and her parcel of Paddy's mending on the table she gave the impression of only partly attending to Tess's account of the hostel where everyone was ever so nice, and how she and Audrey had peeped inside the British Museum and were going again, and how she had been allowed to attend lectures yesterday and this morning although her course didn't start until Monday and she was simply aching for it to begin because the lectures had been utterly thrilling. She was still talking when Mabel went upstairs to take her things off and hadn't finished when Mabel came down again. Susan invited her to stay on for tea and sausages at six and there the two of them sat, jabbering away, while Mabel had time to get through Paddy's mending. Except for a pair of silk evening socks it was all finished—folded when Tess announced she must go.

"What you doing to-morrow?" Mabel asked, inspecting Tess for one of the holes she had just dealt with. "I'm going to morning service at dear old St. Paul's and you'd better come with me. Be long here at half-past nine and if these are done we'll take Chelsea the way and leave them."

"Yes, Auntie," agreed Tess, with a sprightly meekness that sounded to Mabel suspiciously like sauce. However there was nothing to be done but give her a look and a kiss that had a faint echo of a box on the ear. She'd give her a word to-morrow, she

decided, but when Tess turned up at twenty past nine looking not only smart but as nice and neat as anything, the word merged into a flow of pleasant conversation started for Susan's benefit and continued for that of the people near them in the bus. On the way from the Town Hall to Swan Parade she told Tess all that was necessary for her to know about Chelsea. She couldn't help wondering whether the girl guessed there might be more than that, but she repressed the reflection, and glanced at her sharply as they went into the yard which concealed number sixty's entrance.

"I shan't be above a minute, Tess. There isn't no need for you to come up with me," she told her.

"Oh Auntie do let me," it was a child's cry, and Mabel could never be mean with a child.

"Very well, then," she allowed, but regretfully, asking herself suddenly why she'd ever brought Tess along when there wasn't any call to? "You'll have to be careful with the linoleum. I as near as anything went sprawling and breaking my neck yesterday," she warned her, sniffing and picking up her skirt in front to demonstrate her opinion of a place Tess might think she approved because Paddy lived in it. Tess nipped up after her and they were soon both coughing in the dust from the disturbed tapestry curtain.

"Wait a minute," frowned Mabel, knowing quite well that to carry this off she couldn't afford to hesitate a second. "There being no proper bell I'll just tap on the bedroom door." As she knuckled her fingers to do so the door of the sitting-room opened wide to frame Percy in a house coat of green velvet, high collared, waisted and sweeping down the length of her exaggerated body into a train. She didn't look like a picture so much as a poster to advertise something. Mabel blinked at the blue lights the girl had managed to put into her hair and heard Tess beside her give a little gulp.

"Good morning, Percy," she snapped. "I thought p'raps you might be glad to have Paddy's mending. . . ."

"Bartie, you are absolutely incredible. You don't mean to say you've filled up all those ferocious holes? Utterly angelic of you, my dear, and superb luck for Paddy. I darn socks and twiddle my fingers professionally but when I've finished the hole is always still there. Really, I'm better with stockings, the finest ones. Oh, how do you do?"

"How do you do?" replied Tess, very nicely. She smiled and twinkled a little at Percy. In return Percy lifted one corner of her mouth. You'd say they understood each other.

"Come in and sit down. Paddy's still hogging it but I'll wake him. He shall make you some . . ."

"No, no coffee, thanks all the same, Percy. And we can't stop, we are on our way to service at St. Paul's. Give Paddy my love and tell him his evening socks are almost too far gone. I've done the best I can but one of you'd best raise the coupons for a new pair."

"I'll advertise in *The Times* for some. Bartie, you simply must come in and bring——"

"This is my niece, Tessa. Up from Templeford on a course to do with her Ministry. I'm awfully sorry, Percy, but it's out of the question for us to stay."

"Is it really?" Of course Percy knew it wasn't and fluttered those curled lashes of hers to emphasize the grey of her eyes as she looked right through Mabel's obstinacy. Tess made a little movement and checked it at once. Of course she wanted to go in. That corner of Percy's mouth went still higher.

"Then, listen, here's something you can do. We are tossing off a party next Sunday evening, probably the Saturday after that too, but it depends on . . . you must come, both of you. Bartie and Tessa. Come early and help me cope. People will be dropping in all day and it's a frantic nuisance to get ready when they won't clear out. Besides someone is sure to give Mrs. Kidd drinks too soon and she'll go quite tiddly. I believe it's that hat she wears makes her weak in the head."

Tess giggled and Mabel scowled openly at her. Here was a pretty to-do, and a prettier one there'd be with young Tess afterwards. Whatever was Percy thinking of? Oh, it was true what Mrs. de Grey's mother used to say; "A woman needs breeding, other people need it from her." Married to Paddy Percy ought to know better although, of course, the Howlands weren't—not like the de Greys.

"Got the idea yesterday that you thought the world of your Mrs. Kidd. Thank you, Percy, I'm sure, and if there's anything I can do to help I'll be quite willing. I dessay I shall be hearing from you again before Saturday, and now we mustn't keep you any longer. Come along, Tess."

"If you don't hear, don't forget it's a date. Come about six. Tessa can come whenever she likes."

"That'll be as maybe. Well, now, if we don't get on we shall miss half the service and that's something never suits me. Don't forget to give Paddy my message about the socks, will you? You run on down in front of me, Tess."

Taking no chances Mabel whisked after her, pulling the curtain back into place at once so she should not have a chance to look behind her at Percy still standing there in the doorway. Once out of the house she started the sort of conversation which would let Tessa know no comment was required so none need be made on Percy or her invitation. At first she thought Tess was going to break in with some nonsense or other; however she only got three "Yes, Aunties" all the way to St. Paul's where she managed to find two places in her old seat, and have a word afterwards with a verger who remembered her. On the way home she began to wish Tess would come out with something, it being unnatural, really, that she shouldn't, seeing how struck she had certainly been with Percy. She needn't have worried. What did the little monkey do but wait until they were settled to dinner, with Susan spooning out the thick gravy of a nice stew, and then exclaim:

"Oh, Auntie Susan, what do you think? Mrs. Howland has asked Auntie Mabel and me to a party next Sunday, an evening one in their studio."

"How d'you know there's a studio?" demanded Mabel, gaining time but losing ground. She ought to have slapped down Tess at once. As she realized now it was too late.

"Why, Auntie, all those houses have studios up at the top. Didn't you notice the skylights as we came along? I expect that's why Mrs. Howland took the place, modern flats aren't really big enough for parties. I suppose my rayon frock will be all right. Mum altered the front for me and put in a panel to let it down. I've got some bits over, perhaps I could make a fitted waistband. Do you think I could bone it, Auntie Susan?"

It was chance, of course, Tess couldn't be so artful as to know that whalebone had always been a weakness of Susan's. Being plump and never having been able to wear proper stays, she had always hankered after the prim cages in which Mabel once achieved her nineteen-inch waist. She now fair forgot herself encouraging Tess and of course after all their jabber it wasn't possible to refuse to take Tess to that dratted party. Mabel sulked a little but the other two were still absorbed in boning and then Tess asked her, very nicely:

"What will you wear, Auntie Mabel? I suppose you'll say I'm crazy but I think it ought to be your ice-blue *crêpe*, without the blue tunic you generally wear over. It looks lovely with your hair and sort of tones with your figure, makes you look ever so young. I wish you'd let me do your hair. I could fix it like that girl's in

front of us at church and make a half-wreath of black roses to go underneath. You'd be the tops, honestly, even with Mrs. Howland and a theatre set."

"Theatre set? Whatever makes you think you're going to meet actresses, my girl?"

"Oh, well, of course I don't know. I just thought anybody might turn up."

"Turn up and turn down like a crooked sixpence. What other people do is no matter of yours, Tess, and I hope you'll remember how your dad and mum brought you up not to push yourself forward nor yet to behave as if you'd never seen nothing nor ever expected to. Captain and Mrs. Howland's friends may be far from what might be looked for but just you bear in mind that it's your own business, and a girl who doesn't forget that is the one everybody respects even if they don't seem to notice her." Having dropped this hint with a gusto which ought to echo in Tess's head for a week Mabel descended from the platform and condescended to ask, casually: "What was it you was saying about black roses?" and allowed Tess and Susan to coax her until she passed the remark that she might go up to the good old High Street to-morrow and see what Barkers had got. When Tess had gone off to her hostel Susan and she had a nice chat; Susan seemed to be trying to apologize for something. The end of it was that they both went up to Barkers next day and bought a hat, a saucy affair, all flowers, much smarter than Tess's idea of a wreath, and passed the following days with an ease and comfort that made Mabel feel almost suspicious. It was like home, only home without the pricks and snaps of life with Het and Doll. By Sunday she felt wonderfully rested. Tess was spending the day with that Audrey girl and did not appear until it was time to start for Swan Parade and by then Mabel felt almost too ready to deal with her before beginning on the evening.

"Come in here and let's have a look at you," she commanded. "How does that frock do? Yes, might be worse." Couldn't have been better, she decided privately, and swept Tess off, scolding her affectionately most of the way, and ending up with a warning that she mightn't let her stay more'n half an hour or so at the party.

"It's all according how it goes," she informed her. "You'll give me a hand if I'm helping first and then we'll see."

"Yes, Auntie," agreed Tess, and attracted the attention of two young men of the journalist type who ran into the little yard

just as Mabel was opening the door. "For Captain Howland?" Mabel asked them pointedly. The young men immediately put on demure airs and bowed her to go in front, which of course meant leaving Tess behind with them and no doubt there were some looks going to and fro but that had better be all or else off Miss Tess 'ud go to her hostel right away, decided Mabel, putting the threat into her back view.

"Bartie? Bless you." The tapestry curtain was slung aside with the unmistakable sound of a rip from its rings and Mabel, Tess and the two young men stopped dead to stare at Percy. She wore a ballerina skirt of orange patterned cretonne below a tiny bodice with cap sleeves above her long, thin, white arms. The skirt stood out round her like a crinoline. She had put more of that blue, whatever it was, into her black hair. This time she fair hit you in the eye. Mabel drew in her breath with a little hiss. Percy bent down, holding out both hands.

"Nobody has come yet, thank goodness. . . . Oh, Ralph, Don, I didn't see you, look, you must help me out. Mrs. Kidd hasn't turned up, Paddy's trying to cope and is making the most frantic mess. Does Tess mind helping, too? It's quite awful, nothing's ready."

"I'll soon settle that," snapped Mabel, taking one of Percy's hands and shaking it. Whether the girl meant to kiss her or not she didn't know but she wasn't in no kissing mood. . . . "Up in the kitchen?" she asked, briskly. As a matter of fact all along she had been looking forward to seeing that place with a bath. . . .

"Yes. Nothing's in the studio yet. This way, Bartie."

"So I presumed," stated Mabel, grimly. She followed that silly skirt with yards of good material wasted in it and stalked into the kitchen. Yes, there was the bath in the corner with a cover over it to hold plates of food like a table. The mess wasn't too bad, in fact it wasn't bad at all.

"Oh, gosh, where is he? . . . *Paddy!*"

The disconcerting bleat of a dance band trumpet answered her.

"He's down here, trying if the scratch on your *Shivering Timbers* record will matter," shouted either Ralph or Don through the din. "It's all right, Percy, we are just coming up."

"You'll please to bring my niece with you," Mabel hurried out to the flimsy top floor landing and shouted back. "And Mrs. Howland says to carry the gramophone up to the studio straight away. The three of you can manage it. Be careful if you are the one to walk upstairs backwards, Paddy."

Snorting delicately after this light blowing off of steam Mabel returned to the kitchen for detailed inspection. As far as she could see Percy had got everything ready, wonderful the amount of stuff she had raised.

"Can you open this jar, Bartie? Fancy fastenings always defeat me. Peaches in brandy, isn't that marvellous? And I've got one of passion fruit, my papa gave them to me. He swore he'd drop in to-night."

"Did he indeed?" Mabel snatched the jar of peaches and practically scowled the lid off. Warm, easy anticipation developed a cold core inside her. Any fun would be spoilt for her now, wondering when Henry Garth would appear with those eyes and that sneer of his. Not that she was expecting to enjoy herself, quite the contrary.

"There you are. Want them decanted into this dish? What's this, fruit salad? You was lucky to get all those oranges and have points for the other things. Quite a spread one way and another, isn't it? Now, where's Tess? I told her to be on hand to help me."

"I'll go and get everybody."

"No! Don't do that, Percy, it's only asking for nonsense and things to be spilt or worse. But you might tell Paddy I haven't laid eyes on him yet."

"I've got some other things to tell him as well."

"Now don't go and upset him. If he eats any of this on top of a fuss he may have one of his stomach turns. I don't suppose he has quite grown out of them, poor boy. Have you got your table ready in there?"

But Percy had gone. The kitchen looked quite different with her out of it. Mabel had a good, suspicious, look round it. Wonderful in a way how these smart young women managed. What was all the stamping just started? In the studio and now on the stairs, people were charging up them. . . . Mabel went into the kitchen doorway and called "Tess?"

"Mabel?" cried a girl's voice, and there among the young limbs dashing past the tapestry curtain was Camilla, in a striped black and primrose frock, the same style as Percy's, but Percy would take the colour out of her, safe enough.

"Well, Camilla?" Mabel saluted her, coldly, but was saved from letting a more detailed snap escape her by the appearance of Tess from the studio. Tess was looking very pink and pretty, you couldn't deny that with her nice natural colour among all these painted poppets.

"Do you want me, Auntie?" inquired Tess, apparently a little out of breath.

"I'll want someone if all this has to be carried through. Now take this small tray, and be careful. . . . What did I tell you?"

"It's only me, Bartie. Sorry, Tess. Here, hand over."

"Nothing of the sort. Tess can manage that one. Come and give me a kiss, Paddy, and tell me where the drinks are?"

"All set in the studio, we've only got the eats to get in. Look, there's Don bumping Tess now."

So Paddy was in one of his moods. He'd started them as a school-boy and she'd never been able to make them out; for Paddy to behave sly and teasing seemed so unnatural. She glanced at him quickly and nodded.

"Don'll stop his bumping if no one don't encourage him. Remember what I said to you about being careful, Tess. Now, Paddy, my dear, you take this one and I can manage the rest."

"Please let me help, Mabel." Now that was proper sauce from young Don Whateverhisnamewas, and Mabel was most annoyed when she heard a giggle and found it was her own.

"Good!" exclaimed Don, and Mabel suddenly decided to let down one barrier and not stop herself giggling again. After all this was a party and they were all of them young sillies. She'd never really minded a young man, and she wasn't going to begin now.

"Go along with your nonsense, yes, along in front of me. I mean, clear the way for the tray. Is that the dancing started, Paddy?"

But Paddy had slipped off and her question was lost in a still louder trampling of the stairs. There was such a crush in the studio that she really needed Don to clear the way for her and she couldn't help being obliged to Ralph for coming up and protecting her, behind. The studio was an ordinary large top-floor room with a skylight. At one side there was a step up to a sort of platform alcove and on this was the trestle table for the food and also the gramophone. Mabel arranged the plates, frowned at the ranks of bottles behind them and came forward to stand on the step to survey the room. The din that gramophone made was not to be believed but it gave you a funny feeling like being next the heart that pulsed for the excitement of all colour and movement. How they all managed to dance beat Mabel. More people pushed in at the door all the time but somehow they were absorbed into the revolving crowd. There was Percy, of course, dominating everyone

with her looks and her height, changing partners all the time, whispering to them before discarding them. There was Camilla with a boy she had probably brought with her, and there was Paddy—Paddy dancing with Tess.

The first couple to reach the bottles and the food came up on to the platform at that moment. Mabel had to give them a look and so did not return to Paddy and Tess until they had danced past. Going very nicely together, she couldn't deny it, and of course as Tess had been invited like anybody else you couldn't blame her if Paddy asked her, still . . . Paddy needn't have. It wasn't necessary. There were plenty he ought to dance with and Tess would have been all right just standing with her auntie and looking on. Mabel fidgeted a little, feeling hot and as if her frock had suddenly got tight at the neck and under the arms, then she was distracted by yet another bunch of arrivals. This time it was theatricals, there was no doubt of that, you couldn't mistake them. They rolled their eyes and started shouting to people they recognized. The party underwent a change, it had been lively enough, but it would never have got rowdy if those others hadn't turned up. Henry Garth might appear any minute now, thought Mabel, and stepped down from the platform where she must be looking rather noticeable. The dancers bumped her with light "Sorry's" and an arm went round her waist.

"What about a turn with me?" asked Ralph, who had only a moment before been giggling with the theatricals. Mabel hadn't danced since the Victory Dance in Ringerton Memorial Hall, but she'd always been one for her toes so she took to them now and quite enjoyed herself except for a little giddiness. Ralph was a very good partner, she couldn't deny that, and when they had circled the room he shouldered into the scrimmage now in progress on the platform and fetched beer and sandwiches.

"It isn't often I go further than orangeade or such," Mabel assured him. "But seeing as how . . ." She looked around her, smiling at and past the party at other parties, in Wilton Crescent, in the posh hotels where sometimes Mr. and Mrs. Howland had 'thrown' them, at the great ballroom in that hotel in St. Moritz. These young people had never known anything which wasn't rationed, they couldn't guess at the flaunting, golden waste of those days, the glory of their free carelessness. They only had what they could make for themselves and on the whole it wasn't too bad. Indulgence and her first taste of the beer made Mabel feel a little moist. She took out her handkerchief and passed it to

over her face. As she drew it down she saw a pudgy hand waving above the heads of the group still blocking the doorway and various agonized expressions as people were obviously hit on the back by someone trying to push between them. Suddenly the someone succeeded. Mabel nearly dropped her handkerchief for she got a fair start. It was like seeing somebody she had known long ago and all at once she realized why. When she'd just come on as housemaid to Mrs. de Grey her youngest brother came to stay with them and he was a young toff, who fancied himself as a man about town in London and brought with him some photographs of burlesque actresses. There had almost been a row, Mr. de Grey saying they weren't suitable to leave lying around the drawing-room. Of course Mabel had managed to get a peep at them and now if the woman who had just appeared wasn't the identical image of the worst one! Older, of course, sinking down into the flattening flesh which had once been saucy curves, bold eyes getting that pop-out look and hair coarsened by years of harsh black staining. She was a sight, sure enough, but she seemed ever so pleased with herself, stood there winking to the men on each side of her, pulling one or two of the theatrical girls up to kiss her and shouting and waving her pudgy hand to Percy across the room. Percy floated over and kissed her, just as if she was fond of her. Mabel strained her ears to catch what they said.

"Why, hullo, Lily, grand of you to come."

"So it is, dear, seeing a wheel came off the first taxi I took and a lorry full of lads tried to make me take a ride while I was waiting for another. Matterofack, I came all the way by bus because seventy-nine's my lucky number." Shouts of laughter went off from the last word. This Lily was evidently a period pet with a licence to be considered amusing. Mabel finished her beer so fast that she nearly choked and as she did so caught Lily's eye. Lily's eye closed in a wink which was probably automatic if not a touch of something Mabel used to hear called 'Ticktollaroo', but that did not prevent it from being downright vulgar and insulting. A lifetime's cultivation of self-respectful techiness almost exploded inside Mabel's chest. Choke or no choke she managed to glare at that Lily—Rhododendron would be a better name for her—and then if she didn't hear the old hussy saying she wanted to see the bath, never met a bath in a kitchen before, thought it a lovely idea, get out and no bother with drying the dimples, just stand in front of the stove. People laughed again but not quite so heartily this time; they glanced at each other and began to shift about. Lily

inspected them as if they had their clothes off. She wriggled her heavy shoulders, the tight-looking jumper embroidered with sequins would burst if she kept on.

"Perce!" she bellowed across the room to Percy who had just managed to escape. "What about it? Lend me a sponge and a loofah-ha? I'll try anything once."

"What about a turn with me?" It was Ralph slipping his arm round the sequins. So he was taking on all the difficult guests, was he? Mabel bit her lip. Ralph might do his best but he'd find he couldn't keep it up for more than that turn of his. And then the old hussy would be just as likely to make for the kitchen and goodness knew what might happen. If she couldn't get the attention she wanted one way, she'd get it another. Mabel snatched an empty plate and glass from a girl standing beside her, stacked them with her own and started to say "Excuse me" in a way that moved everybody in her path. She slipped through the crowd in the doorway and shot into the kitchen, snapping the door shut behind her.

"Oh, thank the Lord you've come, Bartie."

"Whatever is the matter, Paddy? What do you think you are doing, child?"

"Fodder is giving out. Someone brought Percy some butter and I'm trying to make a few more sandwiches."

"'Trying' is right. For pity's sake give me the loaf and that knife. There, I thought so, cut your thumb all over the crust. What have you got that thing on for?"

"It's Percy's apron. She said I must wear it because she's no good at de-mucking my clothes."

"Well, if she isn't I am and I'm here." Mabel glared at the silly little frilled thing, at Paddy's knees below it and then at his hot and roughened hair. Her heart melted but her party manners still held. All the time people were bumping against the door, at any minute one of them might open it.

"Yes, thank the Lord, as I said. Oh, Bartie!" Whatever did the boy mean, whatever was he at? His arms went round her neck, just as they used to when she had to stoop down almost as far as the nursery floor for him to reach her, and the hug he gave her nearly had the breath out of her body, she wouldn't have believed Paddy could have squeezed so hard or would have wanted to. Response leaped in her and so did the devoted instinct which told her that Paddy needed comfort and soothing more than response.

"That's right, dear, I'm sure I hope it's done you good like

it's done me. But we mustn't forget ourselves. You are a man now, Paddy, bless you, even if you are still my own dear boy who won't take it amiss if I ask him . . ."

"Oh . . . Auntie?"

"Now, then, Miss, what do you want?" Mabel whirled round to fix Tess with a glare. She expected a cool reply and was surprised to see Tess flush deeply and bite her underlip just as she did herself when she was real upset about something. "What do you want?" she repeated savagely because she could only think of how Paddy would hate to be caught like this. Stop him from ever being himself with her again.

"Percy . . . I mean, Mrs. Howland, was asking about the sandwiches. I thought perhaps I could help with . . ."

"You did, did you?" blazed Mabel, quite forgetting herself. Had Tess tried this game on purpose to sneak in here and be with Paddy? He ought never to have danced with her, encouraging a girl in her station. The good old word came to Mabel like a life-buoy over the tempestuous sea of all she had to pretend to like and never would. She snatched the loaf again and pressed it to her breast, cutting with the pace and passion of inspiration and the precision of a machine. "You can butter these slices, then, that is if so be you don't make a mess of it. Paddy, my dear, give me the paste—foar-grah, is it?—I'll spread that myself and then you can call Ralph or Don, or one of those to carry the plates into the studio. You and me's going home, Tess."

Tess didn't say a word. Perhaps she'd been in there behaving like she shouldn't and felt guilty? The wildest possibilities streaked across the blackness of Mabel's temper. She finished with the loaf and tossed the crust end of it on to the bath table. "There won't be enough paste, where's that pot of preserve stuff, I'll split these scones and put that in. Get your coat and bring mine too, please, Tess."

It was obvious that Tess couldn't butter bread and get coats at the same time but still she didn't say a word. Neither did Paddy until a bunch of boys came into the room and the situation was dissolved in din.

"Give my love to Percy, and thanks. Much enjoyed ourselves, I'm sure," shouted Mabel, and swept Tess out and down the stairs on which they passed a young man who looked at her and said "Hey, going already?" in a way that quite justified the scolding Mabel gave her while they waited at the bottom of Oakley Street for their bus.

"What your dad would say, I don't know, and whether I ought to write to him I'm wondering. 'Tis my opinion that you behaved sly, Tess. Making yourself at home so ready, and using given names, no matter whether you took yourself up afterwards or not. It's Captain Howland I'm thinking of, who was brought up by me if I say it myself. How he acts when he's excited and what he thinks afterwards are two different things. You are my own niece and I'm responsible for you, let alone being the one to be shamed by misbehaving. Supposing Mrs. Howland's dad had happened to come in? The bare thought of it makes me go cold all over. And there's something very awkward bound to be now. What'll you do if you're staying at Seven, Bell and meet Captain or Mrs. Howland going to and from their bungalow? You'll hardly know where to look, Tess."

"They aren't going to be there, not this summer anyway. They are letting it to a Mr. and Mrs. Ryan, did you notice her, a blonde, she'd got her hair beautifully tinted and wore a paste star in it to match the two clips at the neck of her frock that was the loveliest dull slipper satin. . . ."

"I could do with a slipper here this minute," muttered Mabel, grimly. "Letting Garth? I don't believe no word of it."

"Well, perhaps it isn't settled quite yet, but the Ryans are awfully keen, they have to go somewhere where they can stay quiet because he has had a breakdown and travelling around makes it worse. Here's our bus, Auntie."

Tess got off the bus at South Kensington Station, nipped off pretty quick which was all the satisfaction Mabel had out of her and even that was spoiled by the matter-of-course manner in which Tess assumed a smart young-Londoner-in-traffic bearing, crossing that nasty South Ken crossing as if she knew it as well as her auntie. Who'd have believed all this, Mabel asked herself, wearily. The fire inside her collapsed and became ash. She could only look forward to getting back to Susan and, although she wasn't one to care to be petted she did appreciate the tea and nice drop of soup Susan had ready for her. What she had taken at the party didn't seem to have gone down too well and this was just what she wanted, restoring her so that she felt able to tell Susan a few things to interest and impress her. But Susan wouldn't let her talk. Said she was sure she was tired and had best go to bed straight away which was all she was longing to do only she hadn't meant to let Susan guess it.

The next morning by the first post she got a letter from Doll

who had bought those hens of Mrs. Moody's after all Mabel's telling her she was silly to want to start poultry. On an impulse Mabel told Susan she thought she'd better go home this week and Susan seemed quite shocked, asking her directly if she had forgotten about Captain Howland's other party on Saturday? Mabel was surprised. She hadn't thought Susan took in about another party; it just showed you, she informed herself, her spirits rising. She shrugged her shoulders, elaborately.

"Of course there's no occasion for me to go, not really, in a way of speaking, although it's true I promised, and I dessay Paddy is looking to have me. I might just pop in and pop out. I shan't take Tess." No, that she wouldn't, the young monkey wasn't going to have another chance at her games, decided Mabel, and then remembered that Percy hadn't been quite certain about the party coming off so of course taking Tess was out of the question anyway. Lucky she had put it like she did to Susan. Pop in and pop out would be what she'd have to do if she found the place empty. And she didn't exactly want to phone Percy to ask, better not to know. . . .

All the week she waited, wondering if she'd hear anything from Paddy. He was busy, of course, but they might have had lunch together at one of those eating-shops in the City; however there it was, he was probably being chivvied by the seniors in his firm and of course the poor boy had no proper home life which would have given him time to be thoughtful for people. Terrible, really, to think of him living like that, with that girl and her crowd, in that place, but no use worrying, and by mid-week Mabel managed to change her fretting into a firm determination about the party.

This time she wouldn't let nobody dictate to her. "Oh, Bartie, this," and "Oh, Bartie, that," was all very well when she wasn't prepared for nothing but now she knew what to expect. She discarded her first idea of going into the kitchen and taking command there and decided to arrive at about the time they'd have the food in the studio and manage it from the platform. There shouldn't be none of that grabbing the dishes and carrying them all over the place which she had noted with disapproval last Sunday. And the bottles under people's arms, not to mention the one young loon she had seen carting at least a dozen beers out on the balcony. She'd put a stop to all nonsense and see that plates and glasses were brought back to be stacked. Wonderful how you could make people mind you when they realized it was no good doing anything

else. Percy might or might not be grateful to her but Paddy, bless him, would recognize old ways and be relieved, whether he knew it or didn't, and all one to her as long as she felt secure in serving him. If that Lily came poking the sequins on that bust of hers in at the door and mentioning baths in kitchens she'd meet something would surprise even her, Mabel promised herself and finally decided that she'd wear her ice-blue without the black tunic over as Tess had suggested. Tess, it appeared, was going to the theatre with some friends she had made at her Course so there was no call for any feeling of guilt and as a matter of fact Mabel felt none at all, only a strong advance savour of satisfaction as she set off with Susan still watching her, she knew, even after she'd stopped looking round. As she turned the corner of Swan Parade she saw two cars drive off from number sixty's entrance and a taxi came rattling up to stop at it. A woman got out and paid the driver while Mabel had a good look at her. At first she couldn't credit what she saw.

"Why . . . Lady Dering 'm. How so-ever do you come? . . ."

Lady Dering took no notice of that, only smiled in a gay kind of way.

"There you are, Mabel. You know the house so will you take me in? Camilla was going to bring me but she had a press-gang invitation to a dance. What a lovely evening, isn't it? Perfect for a view over the river."

Instinctively using her old parlour-maid's manner Mabel stepped across the little yard and opened the door for Lady Dering. The bleating of the gramophone, voices joining in some chorus or merely shouting and an undercurrent of chinking glass came down the stairs to meet them.

"The fun started already." Lady Dering stood at the bottom of the stairs, her face raised and looking as young as a girl's. "Come on, Mabel."

Come on indeed. What about how she had sniffed at Percy and Paddy that day at the Ladies' Bruton? Mabel gave her nose a quick nip to repress a snort as she followed Lady Dering's light, high heels up and round all the hair-pin bends of the staircase until they stopped at the tapestry curtain. From there on to the top the stairs were blocked solid. And the din. Everyone was singing some crazy song, and upon Mabel's word, there were Lady Dering's lips moving as if she was singing it too.

"Excuse me," snapped Mabel, and poked a girl in front of her between the shoulder blades.

"Oh, I'm frightfully sorry."

Are you, inquired Mabel by means of a look the girl shouldn't forget in a hurry. She gestured Lady Dering to take advantage of a sliver of space and slipped after her, working her shoulders as she used to do in football crowds to protect little Paddy at her side. They reached the studio landing at last and someone cried "Edith!" to Lady Dering and drew her out of sight. How it was managed Mabel couldn't imagine. People were almost fighting to get from the kitchen into the studio. All the time they were singing Mabel couldn't make out what the song was, but through it heard a small tapping sound going steadily in a neat rhythm which didn't match the sprawling blare.

"Hoops there!" exclaimed a man in the studio doorway. A girl squealed and suddenly appeared on his shoulder. Jostling and wriggings eased the crush a little and Mabel plunged through them. She got into the doorway, relieving her feelings by giving the man with the girl on his shoulder a sharp jab then she worked sideways until she got a toe on the platform and at last was able to see the room. The crowd in it had been pushed back to free a small patch of floor in the centre. On this a small man in conventional evening dress was dancing a castanet dance. If the man's clothes were conventional the rest of his appearance was not. He had a pointed golden beard, a wreath of gold hair round a pink crown, enormous brown eyes which he rolled to mark the rhythm of his castanets and a delicacy of movement which allowed him to point his toe as Mabel had not seen it done since the days of the little de Grey's dancing class. The patch of floor looked like an enlargement of his own pink crown and he skipped about it, his castanets snapping, his pretty little feet darting from step to step, faster and faster until he ended by spinning round, one hand on his hip, the other above his head, his beard cocked in the air.

"Stevie! Grand boy, Stevie!" Since the days of the football matches Mabel had not heard such a roar. Plaster sprinkled her from the studio ceiling and she had to grab the man next her to save herself from being pushed off the platform. 'Stevie' was now making a court curtsey and retiring to the shelter of the gramophone where someone handed him a fan which he flirted exquisitely, beckoning up his admirers to whisper to them behind it. Percy, in a scarlet frock, close-fitting as her own skin, came first. Paddy followed her with a glass and then took over the working of the gramophone. A bunch of girls came next with cracker they invited Stevie to pull with them. Amid yells and yelps a girl

paper crown was fitted on to the wreath of hair round his pink head and a shawl produced and hung from his shoulders. The girls picked it up like a royal train and then someone snatched the crown off his head and put a paper sunbonnet on it. Tossing the shawl aside, Stevie, with the sunbonnet tipped over one ear, began to caper in a jig. The whole room clapped, whistled, shouted, drew corks and, as well as it could, capered too.

Mabel was pushed off the platform at last. She stumbled, nearly wrenching her ankle and a young sauce-box of a girl had the cheek to say, "Hullo? Steady, there," to her.

"Steady yourself," she muttered, passionately, and used her elbows like a pair of truncheons to get herself out of the room and down the stairs. Directly she was free to run she ran, but the noise seemed to follow her through the bottom of the house which was quaking with it, across the little yard and round into Swan Parade. By the time she reached safety she was drawing half-sobbing breaths as she talked to herself.

"Of all the exhibitions. Downright disgusting, that's what I call it. Not a party at all, just an excuse to behave like nobody'd be allowed to in a low pub. I've seen some nonsense in my time at Wilton Crescent and spoken my mind about it but this fair beats me. How I'm to tell Paddy what I think I don't know. And Lady Dering watching it all. She may laugh to-night but she'll be sneering to-morrow morning, and passing goodness knows what remarks to who. 'Lovely evening for a view over the river.' I shouldn't be surprised if she hadn't known what to expect, and come on purpose. Oh, that Percy, she'll be the ruin of Paddy one of these days, and me to stand by watching with me hands tied. . . ." She bumped against a woman who was just walking along and the glance of mild surprise she received completed her exasperation. Yes, there were plenty about with nothing to worry them and no more to do than take evening strolls not bothering about anybody. Even Susan, with her nice little house and that pension and Winnie never in the way. She hoped she wouldn't be short with Susan when she got in but she didn't know how to contain herself. She pulled up at that for her temper had just turned towards making a certain plan of which she mustn't let a hint escape her because Susan would never approve of it, and she wasn't going to have no one stop her. She couldn't refuse the cup of cocoa Susan had ready but she got off to bed as quickly as she could and lay, without closing her eyes once, staring into the close walls-of-London darkness, waiting for the morning and the thing she was determined to do.

She got up early although she knew very well there was no need of it. Quiet as a field mouse she dressed and slipped down to make herself some tea and leave a note on the end of the kitchen table for Susan. Then she slipped out, shutting the door as if she was moving a feather.

The early London Sunday morning was radiant and lazy in its smoky sunshine with the rows of small houses faintly misted on each side of the shining surfaces of the streets. Mabel was Londoner enough to feel a twinge of appreciation and country-woman enough to tell herself that with less traffic all that needed doing to the place showed up shocking. She took a bus in which she found it necessary to inquire three times of the conductor if he was going anywhere or just going and at last was stepping out down Swan Parade, her eyes hot and blank with all she was remembering and all she was proposing.

"I shall know this place before I'm finished with it," she muttered as she turned into the now familiar yard. The door was open and a young woman in a distinctly off-white linen coat was shaking a mat and looking over her shoulder at the same time as if she expected a camera to catch her. Although she obviously considered it wasted she gave Mabel a star's brilliant smile.

"Isn't it?" she inquired, vaguely, not noticing that Mabel hadn't said, "Lovely morning," and went back to waiting for the camera. Mabel reminded herself that impudent as the young woman's manner was it must be preferred to the one she might have met had the mat shaker been of the bristling respectable type whose husband would have passed judgment concurrently with threat on last night's goings on.

"If anyone thinks *this* is the sort of thing I like or have been accustomed to . . ." she warned the sinister staircase in front of her in quite a loud voice but raised no response beyond a strengthening smell of sour washing and cabbage water. Then she started her climb, making no secret of it, in fact almost stamping on each stair and not even thinking of Paddy until she reached the tapestry curtain.

The tapestry curtain was drenched in smoke and when she pulled it aside the fumes of last night met and whirled past her down to have it out with the washing and the cabbage. She coughed and dabbed her eyes. Thus refreshed they showed her the door of Percy's and Paddy's room shut in a way that informs a trained domestic glance of undisturbed sleep going on behind it. The door of the sitting-room was ajar and although she was itching to get up to the studio above, Mabel thought she might as well look in.

During the rest of her life, whenever she felt the need of an astringent tonic, Mabel had but to remind herself of what she saw when she pushed that door. The old console had been broken and its looking-glass back was propped against its front. Four out of six brackets slung tipsy-crooked on the wall and the rubbish they had held was worse than rubbish on the floor. All the chairs were upended, including one missing a leg which lay across the smart little trolley. Sunshine and brilliant river reflections danced in and out of the rips in the flapping blind and caught answering sparks from all over the carpet—someone had smashed the little glass tank and the mother o' pearl lilies. The blind flapped higher, sunshine ran underneath it, caught the tip of a golden beard pointing at the ceiling from the middle of a cushion on the sofa.

Mabel marched across the room. As she reached the sofa the enormous brown eyes above the beard rolled open and Stevie smiled as if he had been lying there expecting her.

"Good morning."

Mabel bent down. She longed to take hold of that beard and pull it, but she merely dug her hands into the cushion, grabbed Stevie's girlish shoulders and shook him until it wagged in the air. The small body yielded to her as if she was giving it some form of massage. When she released it Stevie sank back, shut his eyes as after an invigorating experience and then rolled them open to smile again. A deep, resonant voice rose from the cushion.

"Of course, of course. I quite understand. Rather dreadful, isn't it? But the party didn't crash until five o'clock and Percy absolutely pressed me to stay. Give her my love. I'll leave at once. But I must, mustn't I, have my trousers?" He tossed aside the shawl he had worn as a train last night and sat up in the nattiest gent's underwear Mabel had seen for many years.

"Don't trouble. Oh, please, don't. Of course I can find them, and my coat and so on. Ah, yes, there they are. Will you forgive me dressing while you are in the room? No, I haven't forgotten braces, I never wear them, something to do with the formation of the hips, I can keep my trousers up without. And now I think I'm ready. Oh, yes, Chelsea is quite accustomed to me, no one will spare me a glance on my way home. You won't forget to give Percy my love, dear, will you?"

"Is it me you are calling 'dear'?" She caught him just as he reached the door. Not since Dick had sauced her as a schoolboy had she given anybody a box on the ear. Stevie went from side to side and

as near as anything head first downstairs. If that young woman with the mat was still about no doubt she heard what Mabel called after him. . . . She watched the last shudder of the tapestry curtain and then turned to Percy's bedroom door. She gave it a tap which would tell those two they needn't pretend they hadn't heard all the noise, and walked straight in.

The blind was up and the room was full of Chelsea-backs light.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mabel, and then she saw Percy lying close to the wall on the extreme edge of the big, old-fashioned double bed.

"You're not asleep, don't tell me. Well, Percy, I must say . . . where's Paddy?"

Percy did not move or speak for a minute, then she rolled round slowly and raised herself on one elbow.

"Bartie? Oh, for God's sake . . ."

"Now that's not the way to talk, and you know it. However, say what you will, nothing'll make any difference. I came along this morning to let you both know what I think and what I'm feared of. Where's Paddy?"

"He left with Hugh McAlister, somewhere around sevenish. They've gone down to a client's lunch in Hampshire."

"I'm thankful glad to hear of him spending his Sunday with decent people, although what they'd say if they knew of his company last night . . . Percy, whatever makes you carry on the way you do?"

Percy did not answer. Furiously Mabel gave her time. There was no question of being afraid she had upset her. Mabel was only afraid of upsetting herself any more. She was trembling with anger, rising resentment at the way she had been obliged to treat Stevie which no one could say was ladylike, and the bewildering shifting of worry. Suppose there wasn't a word of truth in what Percy said? She might have got rid of Paddy, turned him out with the crowd last night so she could keep that Stevie here. . . .

"It's not that I'm thinking the worse although anybody else might. I'll be glad enough to know you don't mean no harm, you and Paddy being man and wife. You'd better speak up, Percy, before I get real annoyed and say something we'd both be sorry for." The girl didn't realize she had lost her temper again. Standing at the foot of the double bed she had all she could do not to go up to the head of it and dig into the pillow as she had dug into the sofa cushion to shake Percy.

"You're not carrying on with that Stevie, are you?" she

demanded. The continued silence finally exasperated her. Nobody could blame her for letting go. "I shouldn't be surprised at anything, no, that I shouldn't. A girl like you jumped up from goodness knows where and with that father of yours." She barely hesitated before rushing on. "No, it's not me making guesses, I happen to know, and from his very own lips, and now I'm not saying any more." It was like pulling up a runaway horse but she managed it. For Paddy's sake. If he should come home to trouble and on the top of it have Percy tell him Bartie had been in saying things against her dad. Paddy had his mother's temper which had been a funny one, suppose he wouldn't forgive her?

"Throw me my wrapper, will you, Bartie?"

How the girl always managed to make one jump. There she was, sitting up in a nightdress that was no more than a lace handkerchief flicked over her small breasts, not really over the left one because the shoulder ribbon was slipping. . . . She stretched out those very white arms for the wrapper and Mabel found she was helping her into it. "Thanks so much. Queer you should have mentioned my papa. Did he tell you he is getting married on Tuesday? To Lily Farren who came to the party last Sunday. Did you notice her?"

"Yes, you might call it 'notice'." and then Mabel threw up her hands and sat down on the edge of the bed. Only for a minute until she was steady enough to march straight off. Henry Garth who at least had looked like a gentleman and that Lily.

"Actually I feel rather the same about it myself. But Lily's a good sort and will look after him, if she gets the chance. Up to now all his domestic arrangements have been pretty unsatisfactory, poor darling. Lily won't fuss him. Bartie, I wonder if you'd be a saint and make us some tea—tea, not coffee? I'd be most extraordinary grateful if you would because . . ."

"That's enough," stated Mabel, loudly, and got up from the bed and walked out of the room. It was not her intention to slam the door but no one could be surprised that it slipped her hand and slammed itself. She ran down the stairs and reached the last bend where the linoleum was so shocking torn, then she found she had left her bag up there in the sitting-room where she had put it down when she shook Stevie. Well, 'twas a certain thing she couldn't go home without it. Turning, she stamped upstairs again, making as much noise as she could just to show Percy she didn't mind if she did. There was that dratted tapestry curtain. She gave it a vicious tug.

"Well, I never. Whatever's the matter with the thing?" It yielded suddenly and fell on top of her . . . no, it wasn't the curtain, it was Percy sliding down to lie crumpled at her feet.

"Now what's all this?" demanded Mabel, breathless with the effort of having half carried Percy upstairs and got her back on the bed. "You're a fine lump, my dear, you mustn't make a habit of falling about. Lucky I was where I was. What turned you faint?"

"I'm all right now. Thanks." Percy's voice was a whisper. She was the colour of a clown's chalk and seemed to have shrunk so that she looked half the size she had been on her pillow.

"Where d'you keep your brandy? Got any cologne? See here, child, if you don't feel no different in a few minutes I'm going to call up your doctor."

"Don't bother, he is coming anyway, round about twelve. I'm all right, Bartie, I swear I am. It's only I am going to have a baby."

"A baby?" It was Mabel's turn to come over queer. She had to sit down on the bed again. Like violent sickness reproach stabbed her:

"And I wouldn't make her that tea."

She covered her face with her hands and broke into extremely loud sobs.

CHAPTER SIX

"GIVE your finger a nip, did you, Mabe?"

Mabel turned her back on the open door of Seven, Bell, out of which the question came and picked up the deck-chair again. The dratted thing generally did nip one's fingers as well Het knew. It was all the fault of Doll's hens. Two of them had come pecking round her and in shooing them away she had let the chair drop. After picking it up she shook it viciously into place and sat down with a flump which caused an ominous creaking and rocking. Sitting out in the garden in front of Seven, Bell, was precious little pleasure but there was no peace inside the house to-day, with Doll turning out the bedrooms and Het making the late plum jam, yet both of them with plenty of time to pop in and stare at her if

she sat down in the sitting-room to read her letter once more. She drew it out of her bag and twisted the envelope. Another of Doll's hens came up pretending she had scattered grain from her bag. Mabel had more than half a mind to tear the letter into scrap and throw it to the silly thing. She didn't want the letter, didn't really even want to read it again. She could remember what Percy had written all right. . . . Of course she had lost her head a bit when she heard about the baby. In going over the excitement of that morning she deliberately by-passed a few of the things she had said to Percy. Percy had certainly behaved very nice but well or sick, at advantage or disadvantage, she remained her own mistress and a cool one at that. Mabel, tears streaming about her face in all directions, had protested she couldn't leave her. "You with no mother and all, my Paddy's own wife and his baby." She had gulped and finally hiccupped. Percy hadn't exactly answered. The doctor arrived and Mabel, not very clear about how she got there, found herself tangled up with the torn linoleum on the stairs heading for the door. After that there had only been a brief visit to say good-bye and find Percy lying on the sitting-room sofa, smoking and keeping a glass on the floor beside her while several people who had obviously dropped in for drinks made the place into a monkey cage and Paddy, to Mabel's expert eye, already wore the deflated, helpless look of a worried expectant father. She had hugged him in front of them all—not what she'd ought to have done, she confessed to herself, frankly. But there had been that feeling of something she was trying to clutch slipping away from her and when she got home it grew worse so she started to write the letters which had turned into appeals for either Paddy or Percy to say they wanted her. The last one must have been a plain question for Percy's letter answered it as such. Percy was frantically grateful but Bartie wasn't to bother at present, everything was going on fine, they'd let her know.

Out here in the garden Mabel was at least free to snort at that assurance. Let her know where she got off. They didn't want her, likely as not Percy was fixing up so she should never get a look in, not even when the baby arrived. It was the first time she had allowed the fear to take clear form in her mind. It turned to terror. Have the months slipping by, not a word coming, Het and Doll sniggering behind her back. Paddy's Bartie not being the first to see his little dear. The creaking of the deck-chair was punctuated by a sort of groan. Mabel got up and dealt with it viciously. When it lay flat on the ground she called to young Tommy

swinging on Three's gate and told him to carry it into the house and let Miss Het or Miss Doll know she was going up to Garth. Mrs. Howland had written asking her to see to something particular.

The Barleigh Road fairly ran backwards from under Mabel's feet. She arrived at Garth panting and feeling just a bit queer. No doubt about it one wasn't as young as one had been and fretting was no sea breeze nor glass of health salts, neither. But she dared herself to hesitate. Snapping the gate open and shut she stalked up the path frowning in her usual manner as she inspected the house in front of her. As she reached it she heard a whistle behind her. It gave her quite a nasty start. She whipped round with a jerk and saw a man and a woman at the gate.

"Was't you whistling like that?" demanded Mabel.

After the slightest pause the man took off his hat, glanced at the woman beside him and cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid it was. Please forgive me. I just wanted to catch you before you vanished inside. . . . Could you admit us to view? Here's my card. As a matter of fact," he glanced at the woman again, "actually we are taking the bungalow for six months from Mrs. Howland."

"You is, is you?" Mabel stood still and held out her hand for the card. The man opened the gate for his wife and followed her up the path. He presented his card with a little bow. Making fun of her, was he? Well, two people could make fun. She hadn't her specs with her but the name 'Ryan' on the card was plain enough. So was the same look on the faces of those two when she raised her eyes and let them know she saw it.

"Met before, I fancy, haven't us? At Paddy's and Percy's party. Oh, yes, I remember you." Mabel allowed a baleful pause to fall and then cleared her own throat. "You don't happen to have heard from Percy this morning, I s'pose?"

"No, not this morning. Actually we haven't been in touch with her lately. I've been doing a cure at Harrogate. We arranged it all before I left Town."

"I had a letter from Percy come by the first post." Mabel had a good look at the two of them before she went on. The man was all right, a bit carved in at the stomach and not as young as he spoke and behaved but his wife who Tess had admired at the party couldn't stand the country light. That hair of hers was plain dyed, for all Tess' fancy talk about tinting and the hard lines stringing her neck took one's eye before it appreciated the smart cut of her clothes. One of these days Percy would start looking

like that. "She's changed her mind about letting the bungalow. Natural, really, in a way of speaking, considering her condition. She feels she'd like to have the place to come to herself, 'tis just what I told her and now she's had time to think it over she knows it. I've got her letter in my bag here." Mabel whisked the envelope out and back again. "'Tell Mr. and Mrs. Ryan when they come down,' she said to me. Daresay she wasn't feeling quite herself or she'd have written you direct, howsoever now you know, don't you? Pity about the trouble it's given you but as I say a young woman in her condition 'as to 'ave her changes. Hope you'll get something to suit you as well as this."

Mabel caught a fleeting look in the man's eye but his wife looked as blank as a stone on the road. If they'd got to get themselves down to the station and then wait for the five-fifty, that stopped as often as it moved and decanted its passengers twice before Reading they'd have more to worry about than what she had told them.

"Difficult, I daresay, to find just the thing but there's always ways, isn't there? You needn't write Percy till you feel like it, I shall be sending her a line to-night. Anything else I can do for you?"

"No. No, Thanks. Thank you so much."

She was glad to see the last of their backs, that was a fact. If once they had got a foot inside the house, had taken a fancy to it, there might have been trouble. As it was, of course, there was anything they might do. . . . She'd pop along back home and write to Percy straight away, then step down to the post office with the letter, taking no chances with sending it by little Tommy Moody. When she reached Seven, Bell, it was dinner-time but something had gone wrong with Het's jam and she and Doll were arguing over it in the kitchen so all Mabel had to do was slip into the sitting-room, push a chair against the door and sit to her letter at the table in the window.

Dear Percy,

she started, and never stopped as she usually did before attacking the next line.

Not hearing from you till to-day has quite upset me. Still no harm done and note that I cannot help at present. I was up at Garth when Mr. and Mrs. Ryan got there and told them all being so undecided

like you was not wishing to let after all. Paddy and you should come down and enjoy this nice weather before tis too late or so be you don't want to travel about. Hope you are giving up your job soon, don't take no risk you could be sorry for all your life. If you was to make up your mind to stay at Garth that would be fine for you and our dear Baby. My love to Paddy. I hope he'll write.

Love from Bartie.

By the time she had finished Mabel's nose was nearly on the paper beside the nib of the pen. Breathing heavily as a result of having hardly breathed at all during the ordeal of writing she addressed the envelope, banished the memory of Swan Parade which assailed her and licked the gum on the flap in the most comprehensive manner. Like always there wasn't a stamp in the house and Seven, Bell's, late dinner was tart with comments on a situation declared by Mabel to be a downright disgrace and by Het and Doll to be no more than anyone with sense would expect, books of stamps costing what they did and the last time Mabel herself bought three tupny-aypennies her losing them. Mabel replied suitably and left the two of them in the sulks when she went down to the village with her letter. Mrs. Pedder, the post-mistress, was a nice woman and it was while enjoying a chat with her about her married daughter's Disappointment after Nothing for near three years that Mabel suddenly realized she must write to Paddy. Mrs. Pedder supplied a sheet and envelope of her own and Mabel wrote in the telegram cubby.

Paddy dear do come. Bring Percy that is. Your son must have the country not London smoke. You know what I mean and won't take it amiss. Now all the best from your old Bartie.

Well, she couldn't do no more. If Paddy had grown away from her so that he didn't understand she'd never trouble him again. But he hadn't, he was nobody's like he was hers, and she'd take the hat off her head and eat it if the baby wasn't to be a boy so Percy had got to take care. . . .

When Paddy's telegram arrived two days later her relief was so great that she could hardly read it out to Het and Doll.

"Coming this very week-end. Oh, I'm s'glad, girls. I don't mind now owning up that I've been fair worritted about Percy. She's one of those in a modern smart set and they'd sooner dare each other to do silly things than take care. The bungalow's looking

lovely but that's not to say it doesn't need a proper turn out, the whole place. Fancy, nor Paddy nor Percy has seen it with the furniture in yet. Guess I'll have my work cut out stopping Percy moving every stick of stuff around. Now which of you two's going to help me with the cleaning?"

Of course they tumbled over each other as she knew they would. All three of them went up to Garth and put such work into it as hadn't come out of the Barter elbow since Wilton Crescent and Belgrave Square days. Even Het had to admit that with the final polish up the place looked fine. "Only hope 'twill be appreciated," she sniffed, quite amiably. Mabel met Paddy and Percy with the station taxi. She stood on the nearly empty platform quivering with the quivering of the lines on the track below her just as she used to when she came down to the station as a child with Dad. The signal clattered down and up leapt the old excitement. It became a new one, one she had never experienced before, when she saw Paddy helping Percy out of their carriage.

Percy didn't really 'show' much yet but having registered this she at once noted the change in her. Nature had caught up with her. The expert girl so proudly careless of her beauty, had just admitted eclipse into womanhood. She'd snap back, most likely, once the baby was born; all these modern girls did and looked the same as ever but for these months she'd have to obey the only law no woman can break. And that meant another, older woman would have a chance of the advantage of her. Mabel's breast began to swell and she tingled all over, but she was precious careful not to give either of those two the least idea how she was feeling. Anyway she could have covered anything by looking after Percy. Percy might not like it, she might hate it, but nothing would stop Mabel quietly taking her arm under the elbow, protecting her from any possibility of a bump, sheltering her passage out to the taxi and settling her in it.

"Thank you, Bartie," said Percy, nicely, but with her face quite blank. Poor child, though Mabel, nearly bursting now with her feelings, and tucking a non-existent carriage rug round Percy like the parlour-maid did for Mrs. de Grey when she drove out in the brougham before her boy was born. Poor child, she'd had a struggle to give way. Did she want her baby, had it been a mistake? Maybe it was only his Bartie who wouldn't think Paddy's baby was a mistake. The savouring of the idea was almost too much for Mabel. She sat Paddy on the seat beside Percy and telescoped herself on the tip-up opposite to beam at them all the way to Garth.

Then she escorted them in to introduce them to Doll who had cooked their lunch and was longing to unpack their cases for them. Mabel stopped that but of course she couldn't prevent Doll taking in every detail of Percy and her condition. Percy was at other people's mercy beside Mabel's, the realization pricked and made Mabel rather too dictatorial with her just to show young Doll. But Percy gave no sign of resenting or even noticing it. She spoke very nice to Doll but was obviously relieved when the necessity for talking and thanking was over. She wouldn't lie down but wandered about, staring vaguely out of the windows, hardly glancing at the sparkling interior of the bungalow. Disappointing, in a way, but you could see she was farther gone than she'd let on, Mabel and Doll agreed that night. The next morning Mabel was up at Garth in time to give Percy her breakfast in bed. Paddy, trying to get it when she arrived, was sent out into the garden and Mabel had quite a nice talk with Percy about baby clothes. Percy seemed grateful, she hadn't, she confessed, started thinking about a layette except for a tiny *matinée* coat which a friend had given her. Don't believe she'd have done a thing if I hadn't talked straight like this, decided Mabel. There was certainly something queer and far-away about Percy. Every time you spoke to her you seemed to be calling her back from a distance. Once or twice Mabel had a twinge. What if Percy was getting ready to do some talking about the Ryans and the bungalow? But the week-end passed and neither Percy nor Paddy mentioned the matter. Paddy took one of his fancies to the garden and then Mabel felt safe. He was as good as gold, did just what she told him and said he couldn't wait to come down again to get on with the gardener's job. Mabel, standing beside a clump of red hot pokers asked him, airily:

"That's to be next week-end, dear?"

"No, because Percy has a date. But the one after, and after that. If the weather holds. . . ."

"You can't expect it but if I was you, Paddy, I'd come all the same. Get Percy to stop on a bit without you. I'd look after and o' course she could have a friend down, not but what both you and me know she's better without 'em. What say, my dear?"

Paddy said nothing. He hit the head of one of the red-hot pokers and a mass of insects slid and fussed out of the bright narrow trumpets.

"When's the baby to be?" asked Mabel, sharply. Funny thing, Percy had never actually told her.

"January, the doctor thinks soon after Christmas. She's got a good man, the one Shirley Romer had."

"When's she giving up that job of hers, Paddy?"

"October—November, she says."

"That's too late, she'd ought . . ."

"She must bring on a girl to take over. She doesn't know if she'll go back or not. Naturally they want her to."

"Don't you let her, not when she has got the baby. Rushin' off, comin' in all hours, neglecting him."

"It isn't for me to say, Bartie." Paddy hit the tallest poker in the clump and he and Mabel were fairly drenched in flies.

"'Tis for you to say that your own son must get what he should. Now you are going to be a dad yourself, Paddy . . ." she stopped and smacked at flies. These few months and then Paddy would find out or not be his dear loving self with his baby. Something far more urgent had to be mentioned and this was the moment.

"Paddy?" It was her coaxing voice, once known to them as the syrup-of-figs voice.

Paddy shuddered as if the flies had gone down his back. Instinctively Mabel rubbed his shoulder blades.

"Nothing to upset you from me, son. Just that I'd like to be sure you want me when the baby comes. I can go to Susan's like always; I've told her . . ."

"Of course you must come, Bartie." There might have been a second's hesitation, it might have been said in a rush, but said it had been and now she could let Het and Doll know. Mabel repressed the desire to hug Paddy and the effort filled her eyes with tears.

"'Twill be in my thoughts, day and night, dear, and I'll start straight away with making some things I've promised Percy. Shall us tell her the arrangement?" Mabel dabbed one eye, and kept the other steady on Paddy. The sooner Percy knew of a fixture the better.

"Yes, may as well." There was no doubt about the hesitation this time. Never mind, Mabel warned herself, 'twas no more than one could expect really, and Percy probably would be annoyed at the matter being settled without her by-my-leave given. I'll have to play pretty with her, Mabel decided, and felt her ability to do anything necessary thrusting inside her.

"What about going along and asking her now?" she suggested, releasing the dabbed eye. Paddy glanced over his shoulder. Percy was sitting in the shelter of the kitchen wall. No passer by the

gate could see her there, it was not like the little front veranda of the bungalow. She made Paddy set her chair with its back to the garden so the kitchen wall and window formed her only view. Funny the fancies young women in her condition do take, reflected Mabel as they walked towards her. It was Mabel who first noticed that the crest of black hair did not show above the top of the garden chair, and saw the slim feet twisted rather oddly with the edges of an envelope and letter caught beneath the heels.

"Paddy. . . Percy, my dear?" she hurried forward and bent over the girl who had crumpled down and would in another minute have sent the chair over. Just in time Paddy grabbed and steadied it while Mabel got her arm round Percy. "Well, this is naughty, fainting again. Get the brandy, Paddy, we don't want her going right off. Poor dear child, it's a shame she should be took this way, not so many are," scolded Mabel, gently, moving Percy's head towards her knees and then drawing her up to take the brandy.

"Letter," muttered Percy. Mabel guessed what she meant; Paddy, fussing miserably with the brandy flask, did not.

"Here 'tis. But not for you to worry about." Mabel whipped the half-sheet and envelope from under Percy's heels and pushed them together into her hands. "And now we are going to get you into the house and right into bed. You've had a nasty turn, dear. . . ."

"No, I haven't."

"That's as may be." Mabel inspected her sharply. The girl was a shocking colour and those eyes of her's still rolling up a bit, but she was trying to fight for something or other. Mabel glanced down at the hands fidgiting with the letter and envelope. "Will I put it inside for you, dear?"

"Oh, no, thank you." Percy grimaced and gestured to Paddy to help her up out of the chair. Mabel snatched up her handbag and opened it so that she could drop the letter into it. "Thanks most awfully. I can walk all right now, honestly. It wasn't anything. I didn't really faint."

"Didn't you?" muttered Mabel, holding the chair while Paddy got her out of it. She followed them into the house, carrying cushions and staring jealously at their backs. She'd lay-a-penny that letter was at the bottom of the trouble, and a penny Percy wouldn't let on to Paddy. If she was going to start secret worries she'd upset the baby, it 'ud be born with a mark or something, or like that one seventh on a branch of the Marsh family which had sat up at three months to rock itself with its little hand to its head and moaning like a woman in pain. Mabel managed to banish

her most acute memories of Ringerton's old wives' tales and remind herself that all Percy needed was sensible looking after. She was tenderness itself with her all that evening, not allowing Percy's heavy silence and the way she kept her eyes shut to make any difference. Still, she couldn't help teasing Paddy a bit to give her his promise about coming down again. Somehow she felt positive they wouldn't after all, and it turned out she was right. Ten days after their return to London Paddy wrote saying that Percy's doctor advised her to have a few weeks in a nursing home under observation. She was quite all right again but seemed to think it wouldn't be a bad thing. "And I'm rather relieved," Paddy added. "This first baby business is bound to be a strain. The worst of it is, you know, Bartie, that I can't help feeling guilty. Idiotic, obviously." But it wasn't, it was just how a dear, considerate, loving boy like Paddy would feel. Mabel's glow warmed the chill of her disappointment, and she decided that things might be turning out for the best really. If Percy came down regularly there might be skirmishes and something said or done to stop her going up in January, you never knew. A nice letter every so often saying how she was counting the weeks and a few little parcels as the baby clothes got finished would be safest. Not that she didn't trust Paddy now absolutely. That letter of his showed he was depending on her.

Bless him, he was artful; he let Percy write to her to do all the arranging. In October it was settled for her to go up on New Year's Eve, that is she mentioned New Year's Day in her reply to Percy's suggestion that she should come round about the first week in January. Percy sent her five pounds 'for her fare'. Very nice and thoughtful and no Barter ever took money amiss but she'd rather have had Paddy just slip her a pound to help. However, there it was and most helpful, let alone quite a little smack in the eye for Het and Doll who had been getting ready to crow over her being short around Christmas time on account of all she'd spent above the price settled for the baby clothes.

She travelled up to London by the morning train on the grey mist-blotted last day of the year. Miserable, down-in-the-mouth sort of weather, decided Mabel, absently gazing through it at the rosy prospect before her. What did weather matter to her? What indeed did anything matter, Percy could behave just as she liked and have her nonsense dismissed as natural. No goings-on would stop the baby arriving and that was all Mabel cared about. Sitting there in her selected corner seat, tapping her foot at the slow pace

of the Government's train, it seemed to her that she had never really considered the baby before. As Paddy's son, yes, but not as himself to quiver in his baby movements, open his eyes and smile at her, be a warm bundle in her arms. He'd be a character, like as not, and handsome (Percy was useful there, with her looks), have a temper for sure and certainly be clever. But most of that was in the future and the future had best be left to itself. Mabel nodded in acknowledgment of that lesson she had learned. The present was happiness enough. It should be or her name wasn't Mabel Barter.

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Susan, the same as ever in every season, welcomed her heartily. Winnie, of course, was off somewhere, and Susan declared she was downright thankful for a bit of company but it didn't seem really necessary because people popped in and out all the time and both her kitchen and sitting-room mantelpieces were stocked with cards. There was a nice one with a long letter from Tess. Mabel flipped it to see the price mark (it was expensive enough to have the price left showing by the sender) and eyed the length of the letter, but just at that moment the front door-bell rang and it wasn't someone else for Susan but a telegram for Mabel.

Percy went into the home to-day before schedule. Will you come to ten Morley Court to-morrow. Paddy.

"There!" exclaimed Mabel and Susan together and looked at each other in triumph and congratulation. Then Mabel got down to business. "Back at their own flat, I'm thankful to say. That Swan Parade place, I didn't want to say much in front of Tess, but I'll let you know now, Susan, 'twas just horrid, no other word for it. If they'd tried taking the baby back there I'd have had a word to say. Howsoever it do seem Paddy has put his foot down."

"I daresay it's Percy come to her senses now she sees her responsibilities in front of her," suggested Susan. "You may find her quite different, Mabe. Think she'll make a good mother?"

Mabel brushed aside the temptation of discussing a good mother's points, and the extreme unlikeliness of Percy rising to one of them.

"We shall see, I suppose. Now what do you think of my Paddy? New Year's Day, I told them and blessed if he didn't guess I'd made up me mind to the day before. He was always like that from

a child. Once saw him running towards me down Wilton Crescent when I was coming back from slipping out with a parcel for home. 'I knowed you wasn't in the house, Bartie; Helen said you was but I knowed you wasn't,' he said, gave me quite a turn, and I mind I picked him up and carried him home, the pretty little dear."

"It's nice when children have their feelings," agreed Susan, in her familiar temperate way. "You going along to this Morley Court place straight off, Mabe?"

If Susan hadn't taken it for granted like that Mabel would have gone. But, with drama drained from an instant flight to Paddy's side, she thought twice and answered prudently. Paddy would sure to be at the home, in a fine fan-tod, poor boy. Wait till the morning would be best.

"We might have breakfast early—just a cup of tea will do me—and then I'll pop along and see Paddy has his. The home's in Welbeck Street and if it's not raining nor nothing we might walk there together. Don't tell me the baby's coming yet. This doctor Percy's got hold of sees there's money to throw about and he's helping the home to as much as he can. Frightening Paddy. Much that sort cares if they do that. I remember when he was born the way the doctor and the nurses played up poor Mr. Howland."

Susan, who had seemed calm enough, demonstrated excitement by calling Mabel in what seemed like the middle of the night. There was a fog anyway which added to the tension of breakfast eaten, in salute to the occasion, on the edge of the kitchen table. Further, to stress their feelings, Susan and Mabel conversed in whispers, as if an expectant corpse was in the sitting-room, and twice Susan offered to go along with Mabel who refused proudly, but at the same time managed to make it clear that she had need of some of her pluck to set off on a morning like this alone.

As a matter of fact she had always rather enjoyed tackling a London fog and was faintly disappointed when she reached the end of Reddle Road and saw it melting respectfully before her. Catching a bus was no bother at this hour and the rattle of the Underground exhilarated her. She got out at Baker Street, took short cuts she'd never have believed she remembered and there at last saw the thin white block of this Morley Court in front of her. She addressed it with a cautious "H'm?" but the place pleased her at once. It had that central-heated look, and although there was, to an old Londoner like herself, something a bit silly in the colour of it and those modern twirl-about windows, still young people like Paddy and Percy ought to be among the first to move with

the times. The lift was, of course, automatic, but she made a porter leave his polishing and take her up to the fifth floor.

"Miss Barter for Captain Howland," she announced in a way that caused the porter to hurry over letting her into the flat with his key. Once inside she had but to give a glance round to know everything. The door of a large sitting-room (obviously the show-piece of the flat) was open, that would be the bedroom door, that the dressing-room, the next some scrap of a place looking out on a well that Percy mustn't think would do for a nursery, then the bathroom and the Hoover cupboard. She opened the bedroom door softly and there, in the rumpled twin of the two beds was Paddy fast asleep.

Every instinct of devotion and selfless love worked in Mabel as she bent over him. At her whisper "Paddy boy?" he roused just like he used to when she had to wake him so he shouldn't be late for his morning school.

"There you are, Bartie," he muttered. It was just as much as she could bear and she had to relieve herself with a little prayer of thanks and a humble request that she might be helped to think only of her dear boy and not of herself. Then she let Providence slip back into its place and started as she meant to go on by wishing Paddy a brisk "Happy new year".

"Oh, lord, I suppose it is." Paddy's yawn was a groan.

"Certainly," snapped Mabel, her old self again. "But 'oo should know better than you that's not the way to speak? With all you've got to look forward to and it may be happening this very identical minute. How's Percy?"

"Not feeling too bright, naturally. That home's costing the earth and she didn't want to go in until the last. Her doctor made her."

"I thought as much," Mabel exclaimed, triumphantly. "Well, dear, we must do all we can to cheer her up. No use asking you when the baby's expected because with a first no one can tell just rightly which is what this doctor of hers is taking advantage of. Not real depressed, is she?"

"No. Percy's never depressed." Paddy hesitated and Mabel decided to do a bit of taking advantage of her own. Upset like he was Paddy might be glad to talk and there was a lot about Percy she wanted to know.

"She's an unusual sort, I must say. I've seen girls in my time but never anybody like her. May as well own up I've always wondered how you . . ."

"Where are you staying, Bartie?"

"Now, Paddy, you know quite well. And I don't call it friendly to put me off. . . ."

"Bartie, shut up. And listen. Would you care to doss down here, until Percy comes back? Dull for you, but I'd like to have you. Of course, old goop. Get it?"

"Your own idea?" demanded Mabel, fiercely. She couldn't have borne it if he had said Percy's suggestion. But he grinned at her and shot himself out of bed sending the covers all ways with his whirling arms and legs. Being a windmill, he used to call it, and Mabel, caught in the eye by a corner of a sheet, had a good excuse to use her handkerchief.

"You haven't changed much, son, that's quite clear. 'Tis to be hoped this boy of yours won't pick up all your young monkey tricks."

"How do you know it's going to be a boy? I want a girl."

"Nonsense, Paddy, every man 'opes for his son-an-air. . . ."

"What's he to be heir to? I'd like a girl. Why shouldn't I?"

"That's silly, and anyway, I bet Percy doesn't." Mabel felt as uneasy as if the conversation might result in the baby being the wrong sex. "Best thing is not to set your mind on nothing and then you won't be disappointed. All I can tell you is that my sister Doll who has an eye like my old mother had and can see at a glance did but glimpse Percy in her coat and said Boy It Would Be. An Eye like that's uncommon in these days specially with one who isn't a wife but our young Doll hasn't been wrong above twice yet. Now, dear, you'll want your breakfast so I'll see to it and then we'll walk along to the home. Like old times and going to the Cadogan Prep. School, bottom of Sloane Street, won't it be?"

The small gleaming white enamel box of the all-electric kitchen delighted Mabel so that she could hardly leave it after the mere wipe-down which was all it required after the preparation of breakfast. And she would have it all to herself until Percy's return. Say a week before the birth and two after it. Three weeks, might be more. She was obliged to turn an audible purr of satisfaction into a hum and pretend, for Paddy's sake, that she was making haste to get off. Never do to let him think she wasn't as keen as he to see Percy. And so she was, really. Also to have a look at her nurse. She understood nurses, many a one had had the starch taken out of her in the old days by Miss Barter.

The nursing home was just what she expected. A great jar of white lilac in the hall and that purr in the walls which means private telephones and expensive arrangements being made for rich patients. No one about, of course, until Paddy whispered that they might as well go up when a nurse at once appeared and made a lot of play with the house telephone and a sort of switch-board on which different coloured lights showed whether Number Seventeen was 'Engaged', 'Doctor Visiting', 'Surgeon Visiting', 'Resting', or 'Ready. Relations', 'Ready. Callers'.

"And after all that they can't even take us up in the lift," muttered Mabel, getting a terrified look from Paddy in return. The things a young man has to go through when he's having a baby. Mabel kept her eye on the nurse's back, and the texture of her veil through which golden-rinsed hair glittered hard. Before she had finished with this home of Percy's she'd find some way of letting it know she could see through it like she saw the hair through that veil. Percy's room, half a glance told Mabel, was one of the most expensive even though it was on the fifth floor. The flowers, of course, were fair silly, and there was no need for Paddy to have bought that wicked-priced dozen of sham-looking roses as they came along. People ought to have more sense than to chuck money about so in these days Mabel decided, sniffing the faint synthetic scent of the poor forced things. Loving flowers as she did she always secretly hated this kind and somehow they seemed to be too much for Percy lying there among them, looking very small for all her condition. Frightened, poor little girl, thought Mabel and was tenderness itself even when she discovered that tenderness was too oppressive for Percy who only wanted to check up on her friends with Paddy and talk to her nurse about the re-arrangement of her flowers for the day. More were already beginning to arrive with New Year greetings when Paddy and Mabel left. There wasn't much baby about the business, you'd think Percy was merely preparing to discard her appendix or tonsils instead of take on a child. Nobody had no feelings nowadays, reflected Mabel, sourly, as she left the room unnoticed during the entry of a small bush of azalea in a peach glaze pot with 'Percy' in simile handwriting (a man's) across it. Although she listened she couldn't hear a single baby cry all the way downstairs and had to relieve her pent-up emotion by fussing Paddy about putting his scarf straight under the collar of his overcoat and threatening him with the comfort he was going to get when he came home that evening. Then she marched off to Baker Street station and went back to Reddle

Road to pack and finally relieve herself by letting Susan have the whole story in a series of close-ups and flash-backs which made the truth so effective that Susan could well excuse herself for not believing a word of it.

"Wouldn't be surprised if the baby doesn't stop where he is for another fortnight. That's what that call-herself-a-nurse thinks, I can tell by the way she carried on," was Mabel's parting shot at the situation as she kissed Susan good-bye.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MABEL had a week and a day at Morley Court with Paddy. Alone with her own boy, bossing him, cooking him just the things he liked, doing exactly what she chose in the flat. Both the porters touched their caps to her, the daily woman called her Miss Barter, a saucy piece who considered herself resident maid in the flat above learned not to throw her dust out of the window and to keep her boy-friends off the fire-escape on which until Mabel's advent they had apparently been in the habit of featuring kissing close-ups as thrilling as any to be seen on the screens of the Oxford Street picture houses. Paddy was himself again. Worried as he was about Percy he made no effort to put up a barrier against Mabel and returned quite willingly to her loving cluck. He was fussed about the expense of the baby she could see that, but it did not prevent her from getting Percy's agreement to the arrangement of the room she was sleeping in (very small of course, but not a bad little place looking on to a quiet side street not a well) as a nursery. Percy didn't seem to have taken a single thought ahead but she did mention the fact that Shirley Romer's Nanny knew another who might come to her if she didn't go to Teheran with a Diplomatic family.

"Yes, and what'n th' world will you have to pay her?" demanded Mabel, bluntly. Percy smiled for the first time. She seemed easier that day, less deliberately absorbed in the affairs of the world going on without her. That evening Paddy, who had promised to come in and pick up Mabel on his way back from the office, was late. When he did come and he and Mabel were standing

in the hall waiting for the right light to show they could go up to Percy's room the Matron of the home appeared followed by a nurse and told Paddy he might stay because Mrs. Howland had Started.

Mabel stayed too. It hadn't been as simple as all that because Percy's call-herself-a-nurse had obviously been letting her tongue wag instead of holding it. Mabel very nearly met her match in the matron. Paddy, the dear boy, fidgeted and asked for a favour. Mabel didn't fancy that sort of favour but it was clearly a case of necessity so she did what she could in the matter of looks at the back of the Matron's head and followed her into a refined waiting-room on the pale walls of which one or two wood cuts of trees and a flower piece over the fireplace artistically distracted attention to the delicacy as opposed to the indelicacy of Nature. There were too near-comfortable arm-chairs set at each side of the gas-fire and on them Mabel and Paddy sat until two o'clock in the morning when Paddy's son was born.

Paddy was allowed to see him before they left. Mabel did not press her claim, she stayed in the waiting-room, her eyes closed, seeing behind the lids just what was happening. Paddy going upstairs and bending over the baby who would look like all new-born babies except to his father. Experience embracing love itself possessed her like a faith. She knew, it seemed to her that all her life she had been waiting for this to happen. She felt for Paddy in such a way that he needn't miss his parents, they couldn't give him more than she could. It was her most exquisite triumph and she could just sit there and savour it. When Paddy came down again she had slipped from the heights and, although yawns nearly spoilt the effect, was able to be roguish with him.

"What did I tell you? 'Oo didn't want his son-an-air? Next time you'd better believe your old Bartie."

"For Pete's sake don't suggest it. Percy's had a hellish time, they let me look in at her but I wasn't allowed to speak and anyway she had her eyes shut. The baby's squawking."

"Crying, you mean. That's right's, so he should. Oo's he like, Paddy?"

"Nothing on earth. Nobody. And the most extraordinary mashed strawberry colour. Hope they won't show him to Percy until he has toned down a bit."

"You want to go home and get some rest, son." Mabel took hold of his arm and wouldn't let him pull away. She wasn't going to listen to the sort of nonsense which dimmed the sparkle of her

pride and excitement. "Come along now, dear, no fuss," she ordered, firmly, and what was more whisked him past the Matron who they met just outside the door. One up to M. Barter, she told herself, gleefully, and held Paddy's arm all the way back to Morley Court through the greasy, damp January night streets. Safe up there in the flat she put him to bed, no bones made about it, and then took off her things and lay down on her own bed, wishing she had Doll and Het one each side of her as she would have had on such an occasion of delightful emergency at home. She did not see Percy or the baby for two days. That was clearly the Matron's doing, but Mabel did not let it worry her. She had plenty to do arranging the nursery, hunting through the Oxford Street shops for the tiny furniture she had Percy's permission to buy and several other things which were certainly a terrible price for what they were but that Percy'd be sure to want. All through those two days she was secretly arming herself for the great moment. It came just after eleven o'clock on a morning of faint, hardly more than cream-coloured sunshine. Mabel was ushered into Percy's room and saw her with her elbow cocked in the immemorial way. True the point of it went into the centre of a rose in a bowl set at exactly the right spot on a table beside her bed, but there was the baby's tiny tufted head moving drowsily against her breast.

"Hullo, Bartie?" she smiled, not quite the same as ever yet, still as if she had returned from a long journey.

"Hullo, my dear?" And then Mabel was free to forget her. To lean over Paddy's son at last, to see the miracle of Paddy all over again. A nurse came into the room at that moment to take the baby. Picking the poor mites up seemed the best they could do for them in these homes, Mabel gave her a good, hard glare and had a last glance at the baby. Then she drew a chair close to the bed and the rose bowl and settled down to tell Percy all she had done about the nursery. It didn't worry Percy at all, money was still easy with her, that was clear, or else it was that her mind was on something else. . . . Mabel's guess came back to her confirmed when she saw the expression on Percy's face when the nurse returned with the baby.

Mabel had never believed Percy would make a good mother. She had indeed pictured her as the sort from whom a baby might legitimately be snatched and crooned over in the proper way to comfort him. It was a real shock to see her eyes widen and deepen in colour and the way her head came from the pillow before she remembered to behave cool and casual. She held out her arms, a

gesture the action of the nurse made unnecessary, and took him in an unmistakable manner. Plain as the signpost on Barleigh Road at home Mabel could read the way Percy nestled her child to her heart. She worshipped him; he was hers, perhaps she wouldn't even allow him to be Paddy's.

"Now 'ow do you feel, dear?" asked Mabel, roguishly. Percy was easing the baby suddenly convulsed and re-crumpled by a hiccup. Mabel decided not to repeat the question; with one as unaccountable as Percy you never knew what you might get for an answer, she didn't want to hear anything awkward just now. Prudently she spent the next minutes admiring the baby, inquiring for the lesser details of his birth, who his mother thought he favoured, and what his name was to be.

"I'm going to call him Garth," stated Percy.

That was a smack. It made Mabel feel uncomfortable in more ways than one. Never do to let herself be led into mentioning that man who had married that Lily and curiosity added to her discomfort by attacking her like prickly heat.

"Patrick for his dad, too, I 'ope," she exclaimed, hastily, and then to her relief and excitement Paddy came in and she saw him with his son.

Prettiest sight anybody'd ever seen, she related to Doll when she was back home and all that happened was safely in the past, where any awkwardness can be denied. For to tell the raw truth she hadn't known what to make of the way Paddy looked at the baby. He had obviously not quite got over his resentment of the pain it had caused Percy and he certainly turned to Percy with relief and was the one to introduce the familiar chatter about their friends. Mabel, holding her tongue sharply listened to them and wondered whether this was her chance to suggest taking the baby. She hadn't touched it yet, and her longing was almost a physical ache inside her. But better not, she decided; Percy might snap her and cause unpleasantness which she couldn't afford because of all things she must keep right with Paddy and stay at the flat. She began to hanker to go back to it and that steadied her nerve.

When Paddy had dashed back to his office and the nurse had removed the baby (mothers in homes, it appeared, were only allowed their children in their arms as a favour) she and Percy had quite a nice talk and Percy spoke ever so sensible about the nursery and the Nanny. Three times, no less, she said, "I leave everything to you, Bartie," and it was arranged that Mabel should interview the Nanny. Ring up this Mrs. Romer at her house in

Upper Berkely Street, speak to her Nanny and say that the friend, if not gone off with the Diplomatic family, should come round to Morley Court and be accepted or discarded by Mabel. It was a job for which Mabel was supremely fitted. Even in the Wilton Crescent days she had never had such an important delicate thing to do. In making her report to Percy she gave the impression that she had recalled the Nanny from Teheran and then as good as sent her back again but mollified by a humble attitude, decided to overlook various modern drawbacks and give the girl a chance to devote herself to the Little Precious, a title which had been at the back of her mind for some time and which she now brought out boldly and hoped it would stop Percy calling the dear mite 'Garth' just as though he wasn't a baby at all.

"I expect you have been splendid, Bartie," said Percy, once more speaking in a vague way as if she was not personally interested. "What did you say the salary was?"

Mabel mentioned it again. She'd never heard nothing like what these sauce-boxes asked nowadays. Half-disgusted, half-delighted she added a few tart comments on upstart inexperience and mouths open wide enough to swallow a Savings Bank but was careful to assure Percy that she'd never do better. Percy took just enough trouble to agree and then talked of her own plans. She had just had an invitation to a party for the opening night of a restaurant which promised to deserve its name 'Pride of London'. Simply huge publicity and although she wasn't keen, actually, on publicity, it would be rather fun this time. Percy raised herself on the elbow which had been cocked to shelter her baby's head. She had made up carefully this morning and now, in her sudden excitement, wore the old look about her.

"I shall try and get out of here in a fortnight, I think I can manage that. My doctor will back me up, he's going to the 'Pride of London' opening himself."

"One of those, is he? Well, Percy, I can stay on to look after Paddy as long as it suits," stated Mabel, firmly getting in something she had been anxious to insert for some time.

"It's amazingly good of you, Bartie."

"Don't you bother about me," said Mabel, hurriedly. She arranged a smile that shouldn't give her away and patted the bed, avoiding Percy's foot as she had discovered it was best to do. "All I'm anxious for is that you and Paddy should have your place kept the way you like it and I think you'll find so 'tis. Now is there anything I can do for you on me way back?"

"Not a thing. Honestly, Bartie, you are a saint."

Maybe, but 'tisn't saints who get their own way in this world, Mabel decided, grimly, as she went out of Percy's room, so most often goodness has just to be thrown in for make-weight. Well, she'd do her best, she informed herself and sturdily dispersed the vapours of hesitant rectitude. That evening she had a real talk with Paddy about Percy. What did she mean to do, Mabel asked bluntly, when she came out of the home? Was she going to leave the Little Precious to his Nanny?

"I expect she'll go back to her job after a bit, it's being held open for her. But if she doesn't feel strong enough at first we may . . ."

"Come down to the bungalow for a time? That would be the best thing in the world for baby, bless him, and set you both up, dear."

"I'd like it for them, of course I'd have to be in Town except week-ends. We might let this place again by the week." Mabel could see Paddy was taken with the idea. Bills, no doubt, were beginning to come in and worry him. A horrid position for a man having to hand them over to his wife, not just take and pay them, as a husband should. Paddy, with his nice feelings would mind it more than most. Mabel nodded to herself rather than to him. No need to say any more just now, or perhaps at all. When Percy came home and the baby and Nanny were installed, all the fuss inseparable from a nursery spreading over the whole of a small flat would do its own persuading. Everybody knew what a ticklish business young fatherhood was, and if Percy played him up by shouldering him off the baby one minute, and stepping out with her flighty friends and dancing off to a job the next there'd bound to be trouble.

"Last thing I'd wish of course, but . . ." and Mabel left the matter there. She devoted herself to the fortnight flying away so fast in front of her, behaved like a saint to Percy, certainly was one to Paddy, began to glory in the baby who grew visibly every day and had eyes the colour of his mother's but was clearly preparing his father's nose, mouth, shape of face, and temper. If only she could have had him to herself for a minute or two. But there 'twas, she'd have to wait for that. And in a glow of golden love tempered with the light steel of perspicacity Mabel set the Morley Court flat in exquisite order, shed a tear on shutting the nursery door and was driven by Paddy in a friend's car to Paddington and the seven-two to Ringerton.

Seven, Bell, accorded her quite a remarkable reception. It seemed that Het and Doll by no means following their usual custom,

had been talking of her turned back with excitement and respect. They were, moreover, really interested in the baby and she couldn't tell them enough about the nursing home and Percy's nighties and matching wrappies. She soon discovered that the fact which had really impressed them was her installation in Morley Court, all alone with Paddy and one of the smartest flats in London to do what she liked with. Magnificently Mabel rose to the occasion. She had left the flat shining but that was nothing to what it was doing when at last she stopped talking about it. Round every tap, to and fro with every window, on and off with every electric switch she led the appreciative Het and Doll. For a month there wasn't a dull dinner-table at Seven, Bell, and Mabel admitted to herself that neither of those two had ever behaved so nice before. The three Miss Barthers expanded as one and the whole of Bell Terrace knew it. Never prone to encourage droppers-in, they tolerated them now. Mrs. Horne, and Mrs. Moody were always around pecking for tit-bits like Doll's hens. It wouldn't have been in Barter nature not to let them have what they asked for and a bit more.

As Mabel's store ran out she improvised a little, convincing herself first and enjoying the result as much as anyone.

Winter yielded to spring, there were some lovely days and Mabel and Doll spent the best spring-cleaning the bungalow which repaid them by looking a fair treat.

"Seems a dreadful pity Paddy and Percy don't bring the baby down now. When did you say they was coming, Mabe?" asked Doll one morning when great puffs of cloud were heading the exquisite West Country blue of the sky, and there wasn't a rug left with any excuse for a shaking.

"Ought to be any time now." Doll's sharp glance caught Mabel's attention and reminded her of the various tales she had told. Just lately she hadn't, in a way of speaking, been any too careful.

"What did Percy say in her last letter?" persisted Doll.

Mabel looked up at the miraculous sky and then away to the gentle slopes of the distance over which brushed cloud shadows, coloured as they are only in spring sunlight, iris grey, lively as a dove's plume.

"She didn't give no date," she muttered. "That is . . ."

"Have you heard since she wrote you about the bootees?" demanded Doll.

The biggest of the cloud shadows passed and Mabel came down to earth with a bump. Of course Doll knew Percy hadn't written, nor Paddy neither. Lulled by the pleasant atmosphere all round

her she hadn't bothered herself at not hearing and never given a thought to Het and Doll noticing in a nasty way.

"Didn't I tell you about the one I got that morning you and Het was down at the Institute?" she countered, blandly. "Bound to say there wasn't much in it. My guess is that Percy's started on her job again, part-time maybe, but started, the naughty girl—and knowing what I'll say won't tell me. I shall have to write to Paddy and get the truth from him," concluded Mabel, rounding off her statement with comfortable severity. But she no longer felt comfortable. For all the warm sunshine and pleasantness of a western breeze she shivered and spoke tartly to Doll about a horrid draught with all the doors in the place left open. Doll merely looked over her shoulder at the doors and did not move to do anything about them.

"Seems as if they might as well let the bungalow or sell it. Silly to keep a good house eating its head off these days when they could get anything they liked to ask for it," she remarked, with a casualness that did not deceive Mabel. Indeed Mabel felt furiously that no one was every likely to deceive her again. Het and Doll and Mrs. Horne and Mrs. Moody had obviously been talking under all that egging her on to tell them stories of her stay in London. More fool she not to have realized it, she told herself bitterly. And just like some creature that had been in hiding, waiting to pounce, worry sprang and got its claws into her. Why hadn't she heard from Morley Court? It was weeks now since Percy's scribble about the bootees and Paddy hadn't written at all. Could anything be wrong? Not likely, Mabel confessed to herself, savagely. Something amiss would be welcome as a reason, anything rather than being just forgotten by those two and that was probably what had happened. Well, she wasn't going to stand it. Before she had to put up with any more or tell any further fibs she'd write pretty straight to Paddy and get an answer out of him. He was a naughty boy, behaving so ungrateful, and the very next time they met she'd let him know.

"You go along now. I've got one or two things to see to." She dismissed Doll, and directly she had got rid of her sat down at Percy's desk and wrote a letter on the paper with 'Garth, Ringerton' embossed in the smartest way at the bottom of the sheets. It was a pretty sharp letter and she only just put 'Much love from Bartie' at the end. Paddy letting the person he owed as good as everything to down like this. . . . Mabel's indignant temper lasted for a week, after that worry got its claws in again. Three weeks passed, a hot

spell nearly as strong as summer brooded over Ringerton and Seven, Bell, was sulphurous with thunder. Never in Barter family history has such unpleasantness reigned. Forked home truths shot the storm luridly. Doll was worse than Het and Mabel had to deal with both, which she did triumphantly, although at the cost of almost vulgar rows. On the last evening, the hottest of the day spell, she was bound to shut all the windows so the neighbours shouldn't hear, and the next morning Paddy's letter came.

"What's the matter, Mabe?" asked Doll, rather sheepishly. "Like a drink of water?"

"No—no," stammered Mabel, fumbling for her spectacles although she didn't need them, for the words of Paddy's letter seemed to jump off the paper at her. The spectacles put them back again and made the few lines small and clear.

"Percy's gone abroad with her father. Paddy's let the flat. The Nanny's left and the baby's with that Mrs. Romer in Upper Berkeley Street," gasped Mabel.

"Well, I never. . . ."

"Of all the . . ."

Mabel burst into tears. In less than a minute they were near hysteria and she could not control them at all. She rocked to and fro going right over the table until her hair nearly touched the bread loaf. It was the shock, of course, but underneath the shock was all she had felt and kept to herself about Paddy's marriage to that girl. It was the snap of the strain of pretending to Het and Doll, it was wild relief and the crash of misery and it was fear like the terror of an earthquake.

"I'll get you that drink of water, Mabe, and then you come upstairs and lay down for a bit till you feel better. I'll help you up," said Doll. Het said nothing. They both made no mistake about the seriousness of the situation. Mabel allowed Doll to dodge round her head with a glass of water and then take her arm upstairs. She lay down on her bed and Doll lowered the blind, frowning as she did so at Tommy Moody who was in the Moody garden staring with his mouth open at Seven, Bell, which of course meant he was listening to everything and would rush in to his mother in a minute. She then attended Mabel whose sobs convulsed her so that she could not lie still.

"You'll make yourself ill if you go on like this," Doll warned her, really alarmed.

"Yes, and then that'll mean the doctor," Het supported Doll. She had appeared in the doorway although later the conventions

would insist that Mabel hadn't let a soul but Doll come near her. Mabel, now genuinely exhausted, spaced her sobs and allowed them to run down. She was, as Doll informed Het, wore out, but her brief spell of self-indulgence was over. In spite of a racking headache she was thinking clearly again and suffering as she knew she would go on suffering. Whatever in the world was Paddy thinking of to let all that happen? What was Percy doing? She'd seemed so good with the baby, Mabel blinked her heavy swollen eyes, seeing again the look on Percy's face as she eased her child in her arms, all the passionate, jealous promise of her motherhood which had actually threatened Paddy. And now to go off as careless as if she was leaving a doll behind her.

"'Tisn't no use my writing to Paddy," Mabel told herself, desperately. "What's done's done. Oh, if only I knew the Little Precious was safe with that Romer woman I don't trust an inch. Whoever's heard tell of a mite dumped in somebody else's nursery like a bundle of washing? Makes me shiver all over to think how he's bound to be treated and as like as not no one even knowing. Catch something, or pine away of the neglect I shouldn't wonder. In all my born days I never did. Seems more like a bad dream than aught else." She mourned, and carried on so that for a day or two Doll and Het herself were really worried about her. It was Het who suggested that if she was Mabe she wouldn't sit down under it but go to London and knock up every door in Upper Berkeley Street until she could put her foot inside Mrs. Romer's and stop it being shut in her face.

"Tell the woman what you think of her," advised Het, who could speak with authority for several of her most familiar tales concerned the way she had got rid of some proper spongers who used to come and hang round Sir Edward in Belgrave Square. "If she's got the baby it's for no good reason, little doubt of that. Just to grab the money for its keep most likely. We all know how one of these jumped-up modern Nannies would look if she was asked to take on another baby as well as the ones she's got. Like as not this Mrs. Romer has farmed the poor child out and he may be lying dead this very minute in rags in the East End."

Het's suggestion was a match to the last straw. The three Miss Bartons all talked at once, exciting each other beyond bounds. It seemed as though they would march as one on London and it was Mabe who pointed out that this evening being Saturday nothing could well be done before Monday morning.

"If them Romers are in that set they'll sure to be week-ending.

Just let me catch her when she's been back about an hour, say Monday lunch-time. I'll make her own up what she's done before she can start any more of her tricks," boasted Mabel, her nostrils twitching as if she sniffed the Romer tricks like gunpowder.

"That's right," agreed Het and Doll in chorus, and Doll who was always one to know when enough had been said, remarked that she'd best go and shut up the hens. "And then you can come and sit out with Het and me in the garden," ordered Mabel, still far from the first pinch of deflation and realizing that it would be no bad thing for Bell Terrace to see the three Miss Barters, harmonious in creaking deck-chairs, after what it might have seen and heard in and out of Seven lately. She walked majestically down the path carrying one chair, Het behind her carrying two. There was a little 'bit of paved' Stan Hawkins had once done for her under the hedge by the gate. It was just large enough for the three chairs and, a rude observer might have added, the three Miss Barter's feet. Mabel settled herself, directing Het rather ostentatiously and with the utmost delicacy taking no notice of heads bobbing at the Moody and Horne windows. Sitting out was a very different thing to walking or working in the garden, it had a code of its own. Mabel raised her *Daily Telegraph*, at the same time telling Het to call 'not too loud' to Doll to hurry up with her hens.

"Wait till that car's gone by in the road," she added. "What'n th' world does the man want to keep on with his horn like that for? Can't be nothing needs passing, he's just showing off."

"Showing off he may be and he ain't passing. Car's stopping at our gate, Mabe."

"You telling *me*?"

The *Telegraph* no doubt by accident, fell over Het's head and face as Mabel got to her feet with an energy which sent the deck-chair over behind her. Het was up too by this time and Mabel had to rush to the gate to reach it first. The spiteful girl gave her a push and she nearly took a header and cracked one of the car's windows. The driver, who was leaning over something on the seat beside him, sat up.

"Why, it's Paddy, Mabe," purred Het.

"Bartie!" cried Paddy.

All anger died on the instant. Had she been, as dad used to say, in Chaynay, she would have recognized that cry as a call for help. Paddy, come to her because he needed her, Paddy, not even glancing at Het.

"What is it, son?" she cried back, the question a promise.

"Hurry up, dear, get out and tell me all about it," she added, whipping into the brisk and practical. But Paddy made no move to get out. He leaned over the bundle on the seat beside him again and the bundle stirred and gave a whimper. Mabel's heart missed one beat and made up for it by racing the next half-dozen into the span of one. Then her arms shot through the open window.

"Here, give him to me. Be careful how you pick him up. Oh, the Little Precious, did anybody ever hear of such a thing? Paddy, what were you thinking of?" she scolded, joyfully, the baby against her breast and the rest of the world spinning out of focus. Paddy climbed slowly out of the car and slammed the door, heavily.

"Can I come in, Bartie?"

"Bless the darling child—you, my own dear boy, too, why, of course, what else?" babbled Mabel, happily. "Hold back the gate, Het, I don't want it slamming on me while I'm carrying Him. Well, well-I-never-never-did-did-I-my-ducksy?" she crooned, bending over the baby all the way up the garden path. Paddy, carrying a pram rug and Het who had got hold of the baby's empty bottle followed her and people from every house in Bell popped out of their doors and stood staring as at a Royal Procession. If Seven had dropped a bit in its due esteem lately, it sprang up again and practically sky-high.

"Look-see what I've got here, Doll," panted Mabel as Doll, bless her, came running the length of Bell down which she had been after a strayed hen. Doll's quite dramatic rush was the crown on the excitement and they all went into Seven, Mabel with the baby leading the way into the kitchen which was not so vulnerable to the pricked ears of Bell as the sitting-room.

"Now then Paddy, sit down and do for goodness' sake explain yourself," she commanded, sitting down herself in the old wicker chair which would once again after all these years help make a lap for a baby. Paddy coughed. It was the short, hoarse, rake of exhaustion and Mabel snatched a second from the baby to inspect him.

"Mind if I smoke? Any of you join me? That's right, Hetty. No, of course it won't bother the baby, Bartie, he's used to it by this time. Shirley Romer's a chain-smoker, so's her nurse, more or less. Oh, lord, I had a time. With them. All my own fault, too. I've dropped in two or three times a week to have a look at Garth and he seemed all right, doing quite well. This morning I was early because I had a date to run down to Sandwich and play golf with a client. Shirley wasn't up and the nurse was in a hell of a temper. I said something absolutely mild about why did Garth

always seem to be having hiccups, and, gosh, she let fly. Stamped off to Shirley and Shirley came along with one eye open, raging. All right, I said, I'll remove Garth, and there I was booked for it. I made them get me his stuff—don't suppose it was the lot—and stuck it in the car and sort of fixed him up beside me. Believe me or not, Bartie, I drove off from Shirley's blind, hadn't an idea where I was going, could only realize it wasn't Sandwich. I stopped at a call box and got through to my man and when I got back to the car there was Garth on the floor, yelling and a policeman looking in at him. 'Don't want the child kidnapped, do you, sir?' he said and gave me a nasty turn. Between us we managed to stop the yelling and then I found myself saying I was taking Garth down to my old nurse in the country. 'Good luck, sir,' said the bobby, and, gosh, did I need it? The kid was quite good, really, he slept a bit and only yelled when we weren't passing any place where he'd attract attention. I kept on stopping and going into hotels and asking for help, marvellous, really, how I got it. People fixed his drinks and hunted his luggage for napkins and dressed and undressed him a bit. There were two frightfully decent girls in the reception office of a pub in Marlborough and one of them had a friend, a nurse, just leaving for some place down South and she let me give her a lift and minded Garth while we were going over the Downs. But after I dropped her at a station he began to get thoroughly rattled and then my fun started. Harlequin pete, Bartie, I don't know how I ever got here. Talk about a hamstrung nightmare."

"Talk about a nasty, cruel bad dream for the poor Little Precious," retorted Mabel, removing a crumpled and soaked bib, which had worked its way round under one hot ear of the baby who presented the appearance of having come off the loser in an infant's prize fight. He was clearly only too anxious to sum up his indignation but sleep overcame him. With a yawn in which his nose seemed to be lost for good, he nuzzled a little, agreed Mabel's devoted assistance and fell asleep with the promise of permanence and that exasperating ease only demonstrated by a child who has given his elders hell for hours. Mabel crooned for a few moments and then looked up at her audience. Keeping her voice muted she managed to invest it with an authority and imperial impatience it had never held before.

"That's that, then, Paddy, and no use lapping at spilt milk. You've brought the little dear to me which was the only thing you could do but still I'm glad you had the sense. Where's his mother?"

"Percy's still abroad, Switzerland."

"She is, is she?" Mabel watched Paddy take a quarter-smoked cigarette out of his mouth and look round for an ashtray. Doll gave him a saucer and he douted it as if it had been a stub.

"That's enough smoking, Paddy, you needn't take another, wasting your money so shocking and I'm sure you've plenty to do with it now. When's she coming back?"

Paddy made a sort of snatch at his cigarette-case pocket looking at Mabel all the time sideways. The defiance was childish, the sheepishness into which it slipped held pleading. Mabel recognized all that for what it was and her arm tightened round the baby. She had something now to stiffen her softness about Paddy.

"Better answer me, son."

"I don't know. As a matter of fact I'm expecting to hear any day——" Mabel disengaged one hand from the baby and held it up.

"You needn't trouble to talk to me like that, and you know it. I'll tell you straight, Paddy, I don't want nothing but the truth. I don't hold with none of this modern slang but you're in a spot, my dear, and . . ."

"Not with you, I'm not, Bartie. I knew you'd see me through, that's why I came. I've thought it all out. You and Garth have the bungalow for a bit, maybe Hetty and Doll will go up there with you. I'll back everything, of course, and—the baby will be all right. For God's sake don't let me down, Bartie."

"That's the idea, is it, Paddy?" Mabel managed to get the question out and disguise the pant of excitement which made it difficult for her to speak or even breathe. For a moment it seemed she'd have to jump up, baby asleep or no. Then she saw the expression on Paddy's face. It was a mixture of several but she refused to interest herself in any but one. Paddy loved his son with all his heart. He'd put himself on this spot—what that Shirley Romer and her chain-smoking Nanny would say to Percy and do to make trouble didn't bear thinking about—all because he wouldn't see the baby treated anyhow. He had behaved like a man. The Little Precious could be proud of his daddy.

"It is, Bartie," said Paddy, earnestly.

"And me old for taking on a baby when I took on you," sniffed Mabel. "But it's a pretty pickle, upon my word, and I don't know what else is to be done. You'll have to make that Upper Berkeley Street lot send on his crib and the rest of his things and hurry them up about it. Master Garth isn't going without what he needs to oblige anybody and the sooner they know it the better."

CHAPTER EIGHT

MABEL paused in the doorway of the bungalow and surveyed the scene before her. The slight smirk which was now almost a permanency on her face deepened to a broad smile. She told herself that the place looked as if it had always been like this, actually she was savouring the novelty of the delightful view of the garden as a setting to the baby's handsome new pram with a proper canopy over it to protect the Little Precious from the soft, hazy sunshine and the sight of Doll's very definite back view as she weeded the only patch of the garden that hadn't been done at least twice in the last three days. Mabel laid her hand on her breast and then quickened to sharpness as she saw the baby's pram start to rock slightly. She stepped across the garden towards it thinking that lovely as it would be to see Paddy she hoped his coming wouldn't upset the baby. When a child had been through all her Little Precious had you couldn't rely on his nerves being what they should. And then there was Sunday to reckon with, whatever the price to be paid the baby must be at his best for his christening.

Reaching the pram and finding its occupant settled down again Mabel allowed herself a moment's blissful consideration of a special achievement. By rights, of course, the christening should have waited for the baby's mother. But Paddy owned up that Percy never meant to have him Done at all, and admitted that if they waited she'd probably refuse to allow it. Mabel promptly banished the memory of Wilton Crescent where she had practised moral indulgence and, using the adjective 'shocking' several times, spoke for Ringerton and what it would say, refusing, for once in her life, to grant any other place or section of the community, a look in with it. Of course everybody would know Master Garth had never been taken to church and did Paddy want his son to grow up for people to point at? Going over their conversation afterwards Mabel couldn't remember that Paddy had said anything. It was clear he didn't mind one way or the other. Mr. MacAlistair might come down but if not the new curate, a biddable young man, would stand proxy for him, and of course Mabel herself would be the godmother, "Seeing as how you can hardly ask that Romer woman nor none of Percy's flash friends," she announced, boldly.

"How you gettin' on with that border?" she inquired of Doll, whose back view was now supported by a pair of heels which looked

very small in comparison with the sphere above them, as she rested from her labours.

"Not bad. Think it ought to do now," panted Doll, the sphere beginning to swing from side to side as she prepared to get up from her knees. She and Mabel surveyed the border which, with one or two others, had re-made its appearance in the garden. Percy had banished all the borders and it was curious how they had come back again.

"Very nice indeed," Mabel assured her, graciously. "There's some who don't care for geraniums but I call it real lucky we had these cuttings and those of Mrs. Moody's ready to put in. Paddy'll notice the place nice and tidy, he was always neat-minded from a child. Now it's about time for the baby to wake and when I've given him his tea I shall leave you to keep an eye on him and just step down to the station to meet Paddy's train. There's this and that I'd like to have a quiet word about with him," she added, impressively.

"Have you told Mr. Grundy the hymns you've chosen yet?" asked Doll, who was satisfactorily awed by Mabel's imperial powers over the christening service and particularly her capture of the curate.

"That's one of the things I'm going to speak of to Paddy. He mustn't expect the Ringerton organist to be like St. Paul's but give Alfred Grundy what he knows by heart and he won't do so badly. We may stop at his place on our way home. Awake are you, my precious?"

The wrench of leaving Doll alone with the perambulator nearly made Mabel late for the train. It was in, with Paddy getting out of it, when she arrived on the platform. Rather breathless she gave Paddy even more of a hug than she intended and showed off to the station-master who was no favourite of hers owing to an obstinate inability to recognize the fact that the Barter family claim on certain privileges had never faded away. The porter who seized Paddy's case, however, was sensible and quite nippy about the station taxi. And no sooner were they in it, off to give Ringerton something to look at as they rattled through, than Paddy distracted Mabel's attention from all she meant to say and do by telling her that Hugh MacAlistair was driving himself down from town on Sunday for the baby's show.

"Show, Paddy?" reproved Mabel, and then had to give way to her delight which she screened by saying loftily: "'Tis no more than I expected, of course, and only the proper thing. Father

Burton-Brown will have to step down. He's the curate and no more a father than I am; less, in a way of speaking. He was to have Stood In for Mr. MacAlistair, I'd got it all arranged but this is according to my wish, and of course yours too, dear, and Mr. B-B will be the first to understand that. We'll ring him up this evening and tell him."

There never was a week-end like this one. Mabel was the first to admit it to herself and give thanks in her morning and evening prayers although as she rose from her knees she allowed herself to remember that the preparations for it were all her own doing. Naturally she hadn't expected Mr. MacAlistair but all the same she had made arrangements which resulted in food enough for a proper christening party. Doll made the cake the next morning, the icing on top of it was thicker than any seen in Ringerton since before the war. Mrs. Moody contributed a tiny white china dove at which Mabel sniffed but allowed that Doll arranged it to look ever so pretty. Paddy was in what she described to herself as the blessed boy's sweetest temper. He did exactly what he was told, carrying obedience to the length of ringing up the Vicar himself and inviting him to the party. The curate had already been invited. The Vicar accepted for himself and his wife. For a moment Mabel's nerve shook. She'd been standing beside Paddy while he telephoned and the Vicar's wife hadn't been mentioned. Suspicion fluttered and so did anxiety. Suppose Mr. MacAlistair didn't turn up after all? But her luck held. Sunday dawned, not too hot for the time of year, but not really cloudy and thank goodness, no wind. The baby hadn't developed a spot (Mabel's secret terror) and showed no sign of internal derangement. Paddy nursed him while she supervised Doll putting last touches to the sparkling bungalow. In the whole of her life she had never been so happy, as she was for that hour. The christening was fixed for three-thirty, after the weekly children's service. Mr. MacAlistair hadn't arrived when the little procession, Mabel carrying the baby, with Paddy at her side, Doll and Het behind them, entered the church during the singing of the children's last hymn. The baby was trifling with restiveness but nothing else disturbed Mabel, she knew now that everything would be all right. So it was, although possibly by a hair's breadth. Mr. MacAlistair hurried out of the porch as the last child vanished into it. The Vicar's wife came up the aisle towards the font, Mrs. Moody, Mrs. Horne and someone from each house in Bell were there. Nobody could say the baby wasn't as good as gold and Mabel could have sworn there was a little smile on his

face when he heard himself christened 'Patrick Garth' just as if he knew his mother hadn't meant him to have 'Patrick' and that his Bartie had seen to it. Mr. Grundy fairly let himself go on the organ and they all walked out of church to as grand a noise as you'd expect at a wedding. A taxi and Mr. MacAlistair's car were in waiting to convey the guests up to the bungalow and when they got there Mabel received them. Doll, nursing the baby, kept just behind her as she shook hands, led the way to the feast and saw to the glasses as well as the cups and plates. Paddy cut the cake and Mabel took the baby in her arms to persuade him to crow to it. Mr. MacAlistair's impressive present of a silver tankard, not just a mere mug, was set on the table to be admired and this graceful act covered his early departure which might otherwise have ruffled the smoothness of the party's success. Mabel wrung the last complimentary hand (it belonged to the Vicar who had stayed on to talk to Paddy, to whom he seemed to have taken quite a fancy) and returned from the gate to the house, simmering with a satisfaction which had to be demonstrated and was, first, by giving Doll a smacking kiss and then by crooning passionate congratulations over the baby. Later in the evening when the baby was asleep and Doll gone down to Bell she and Paddy sat together smoking the cigarette of achievement after a supper she didn't hurry to clear away. She hadn't planned to say anything special but feeling like she did on top of Paddy's world as well as her own when a question slipped out she waited for an answer to it and then asked it again.

"You needn't think me real nosy, son. Between ourselves I know a bit more than ever you'd guess about Percy's dad. Howsoever I wasn't going to mention that. But I'd like to know more about this trip of theirs. It's true he's married, isn't it?"

"Yes, he's married."

"To that——? I saw her at your party. D'you still call her Lily?"

"Of course, Percy does." Paddy had been fidgeting for some time; now he was looking round him with the unmistakable air of a man hunting for a loophole of escape.

"Then that's that," concluded Mabel, quickly. "Well, where is she? Why didn't she take her own husband abroad?"

"Percy wouldn't let her." The queerness of the reply required a minute or two to grasp. Mabel doted her cigarette and sat up straight in her chair to stare at Paddy.

"Is he ill or anything? Oh, yes, I've seen him. He looked funny to me, s'if he might have something the matter with him." That

was another thing to slip out, and when it had she felt somehow or other as if she was quits with Mr. Garth turned Dennis.

"He may be." Paddy's cautious stiffness eased and he relaxed in his chair. Mabel's stare became a sharp look.

"Still that ain't no reason for his wife not to do her duty. Percy had you and the baby. Sounds like plain selfishness to me, but there may be more in it. You know, Paddy, you'll have to sort of start afresh now. Can't have Percy at that man's beck and call can you? Not if you want your peace and comfort and the Little Precious too. Me being who I am I suppose you wouldn't like to make me a promise?"

"Daresay I should, Bartie, but I can't. And I can't say any more."

Finality rang out clear and nearly loud enough to wake the baby. Avoiding Mabel's eyes Paddy jumped up and wandered out of the room and the house into the garden. Oh, well, let him go, decided Mabel, realizing that she had no choice in the matter. That was enough for once, she'd tackle him again the next time he came down, she consoled herself. She began to clear the supper but the itch to be with Paddy in the garden was too strong for her and she did violence to her principles by stacking the dishes in the sink and leaving them. Then she stepped out of the back door and, ignoring Paddy who was at the gate, smoking over it in a common sort of way she didn't at all approve, stepped across to inspect one of the geranium borders. Just as she had hoped Paddy turned round, hesitated a minute and then joined her. What was more he slipped his arm round her waist in the old way.

"Haven't told you about my new job, Bartie, have I? You know I left the Stock Exchange? Just about the time Percy went abroad. There was nothing doing. I'd been meaning to shift on the first chance ever since I got married."

"Never told me a word. Well, better late than never, I s'pose. Of course you are right to want to earn enough to keep your family. Go on, Paddy," said Mabel, firmly.

Paddy twitched his shoulders sulkily but she waited.

"Whatsit you are doing, dear?" she demanded at last.

"I'm in a firm which handles agricultural produce. We receive in town and deliver to the retail buyers."

"Middleman business. Hope you get a peck at the profits they make. Is this 'agricultural produce' vegetables?"

"Chiefly, yes. We shall probably expand and do the corn and seed stuff. There are big opportunities around. I like the job, it's lovely."

"Well, that's something," observed Mabel, dryly. All the commonsense she could command for Paddy's sake was working and she decided she would say no more, because anything would sound as if she was criticizing, and since the boy had committed himself it was no use upsetting him. Besides it might be all right, everything had changed since her day, not to mention that if money was slipping about easy Paddy was the best person to have it.

"Glad you've told me at last, dear," she assured him, warmly, and after that they had a nice evening and a pleasant scrap of morning next day before the taxi arrived to take him down to his train.

"You are coming again the week-end after next, son," was her parting salute of a gun. She wasn't going to say "next week-end" and have him refuse and then give her the slip. She returned to the house with plenty to think about, but nothing, really, to worry about, she assured herself.

"There!" she exclaimed, very proud of her perspicacity when a card arrived from Paddy saying that he would be driving down for two days in the middle of the week. 'Business and pleasure' was scribbled at the bottom of it, and Mabel prepared accordingly. It would all be pleasure for her anyway. Paddy arrived very late in the evening in a wonderful new car. Mabel was almost sorry she had not allowed Het and Doll to be with her to see it slide up to the gate. She at once planned a ride down to Bell next day, herself sitting beside Paddy, but before he so much as set a foot inside the house Paddy told her that he had to contact a man in Tolbury at ten-thirty, would be moving off before eight and couldn't say when he would be back.

"May sleep there. I'm taking my case along."

"Yes, but you're coming back here to-morrow, ain't you?" demanded Mabel, in a sudden little spurt of panic. There was an odd look about the boy and he kept glancing over her shoulder instead of meeting her eyes.

"Naturally you old goop." But she had only caught him just in time, she knew that, and even now perhaps he wouldn't return.

"Is anything wrong, dear?"

"Gosh, no. I'm learning a new trade, that's all."

"Don't like the cut of it," muttered Mabel, and from that moment she began to worry. Paddy could talk as he liked, and did, he could put his arm round her and kiss her and bend with interest over the baby. But he had changed, or else a change that had

been gathering for some time first showed itself. If something wasn't wrong something right had been left behind. Mabel knew she wasn't mistaken although she hardly had one quiet word with Paddy. He came back from Tolbury at eleven at night dead-beat, and hardly had his eyes open next morning when he got into the car to drive to Barton. He did not return from Barton until midnight, overslept the next day and had in his own words "to smack at it". With nothing inside him but a cup of tea he got out that dratted car again. Mabel nearly went dotty trying to remember all she wanted to say to him and he shouted to her as if he was already a long way off.

"No. Haven't heard, they are leaving Switzerland but not coming home yet. Yes. No. Look here, Bartie, I rather think I mayn't be able to. The Tolbury business turns out to be a bit complicated, it has changed all my plans. Can't promise anything definite, but of course I'll date you directly I can." He let in the clutch on that and roared away leaving Mabel so dazed she could hardly recognize the sound of the baby crying.

"Just as well I didn't get Doll or Het up while he was here," she muttered as she hurried into the house to let the baby know that she felt much the same as he did. It was a cheerless bit of comfort because it reminded her that she couldn't confide in anybody. The hollow feeling this engendered did not get any better as the day wore on; even the Little Precious couldn't help her and by six o'clock (Doll not having popped up for tea as she'd promised) Mabel admitted to herself that she was fairly down in the dumps. The baby, rather heartlessly, settled to sleep early and she sat down to Paddy's mending when the soothing run of her needle suddenly gave her an idea. She'd invite Tess up for the week-end. She hadn't seen or heard anything of the girl lately and it was time she was inspected again, let alone the good it would do her to see her auntie in possession of Captain Howland's bungalow and baby. If Tess came (and come she should or Mabel 'ud know the reason why) she wouldn't feel so kinder lonely.

Tess wrote a nice, polite acceptance of her auntie's invitation and arrived a couple of week-ends later, carrying a smart zipped hold-all bag and saying that she had just stopped at Bell on her way up to say howdy-do to Auntie Het and Auntie Doll. So she ought to, but Mabel enjoyed an invigorating pinch of resentment at the way Tess always managed to be a step ahead of her elder's proper patronage. 'Twould have been more the thing for Tess to hurry up to Garth and been sent back down to Bell after tea. How-

ever, as usual, it was so nice to see the girl that you couldn't hold anything against her, let alone that she'd probably tweak it away from you if you did. . . . Mabel allowed her to admire the baby and have her tea watching Mabel nurse him. Then she took her all over the bungalow and made her understand what luck she was enjoying by staying in it. Tess, as usual, was ready with her "Yes, Aunties," and her good temper and manners did not fail her under a searching examination of her growth, looks, clothes, progress at the Ministry, and expectation of being sent to take charge of one of its Departments in Exeter or Salisbury.

"Well, 'pon my word," exclaimed Mabel, who hadn't expected to flush this last piece of information. She checked further comments which occurred to her and asked, slyly, "So you're not thinking of getting married? When a girl goes round looking as smart as you do, Tess, that's generally what she's after."

"No, not yet, Auntie," replied Tess, cool as if she was answering a query on a memo at her Ministry. So she'd got everything cut out; perhaps there was a boy mooning round her already, or more likely some smart young Civil Service man who she'd produce as if she'd brought him out of her bag and neither Dick nor Jean able to say a word whatever they thought.

Mabel took refuge in an indignant assumption of Tess's parents' grief on the occasion of their daughter's flouting of their feelings. The one or two sniffs she allowed herself told Tess what she was doing but she was just going to supplement them with a verbal exposition when the baby started to throw himself about in her arms and Tess exclaimed:

"Oh, Auntie, do let me take him; and can I give him his bath? There has been a course of 'Mummy-one-day' demonstration lectures at the clinic at Templeford and I attended it and got my star. I meant to wear it as a clip in my buttonhole coming up this afternoon but Mum didn't want me to."

After that there was nothing to do but let Tess please herself and repress slightly grudging clucks to distract the baby's attention from her undeniable nattyhandedness. When the baby was in bed they had what anybody must admit was a nice talk, a supper garnished with Tess's genuine appreciation of it and an enjoyable listen-in to the radio although once or twice Mabel had to pull the girl up when she started talking as if she had the stars of Broadcasting House as well as the one from the Templeford clinic in her buttonhole. The next morning Mabel was wakened by an early cup of tea with Tess in a floral housecoat behind it.

"That'll be enough, dear," mumbled Mabel, and Tess took the hint. She played visitor very prettily although somehow she always managed to have the baby in her arms. And she showed no particular anxiety to go down to Bell on the errand Mabel invented for her. She soon returned from it and from the village with the two-three things Mabel wanted, reported that Auntie Het and Auntie Doll were both going to the Festerton Fête and said wouldn't we, but need we, Auntie? Tess's tone was pleading and gave Mabel her opportunity but somehow she couldn't fancy Festerton Fête either, let alone that it was no place for the Little Precious with one of those Baby Shows being held at it where he might pick up anything and like as not be cheated out of the first prize by Jealousy.

"Very well, then. If you'd like to stop home in the garden, you can," Mabel announced with the air of one washing her hands of a slight stain of ingratitude. After their early dinner Tess carried two deck-chairs into the garden and arranged them, just as Mabel liked, in support of the perambulator, one a little closer to it than the other. Most tactfully Tess then sat down in the farther chair and produced her book which she explained to Mabel had been bought specially for her because she had a student's ticket at the Young Readers' Western Regional Library. "It's called *The Four Georges*, Auntie, and it's ever so interesting."

"It is, is it, Miss?" snapped Mabel, proudly. "Well, safety in numbers. Four of 'em between covers may be better than one walking about for all you tell me you're not thinking of getting married yet. And speaking of that, my dear, there are a few things I should like to say to you, they've been on me mind ever since that time in London. You know, Tess . . ."

"Yes, Auntie, and I'd like to have a real talk too, but it's a shame to tease you when you've been working so hard. Why don't you relax and catch a little rest? I'll keep an eye on Garth."

"He won't need no eye kept on him," Mabel mumbled through a yawn, the third she had struggled with but the first to betray her. Or so she believed but that sly puss, Tess, must have seen her suddenly going sleepy. The weather, most likely, there were thunderclouds about over Barleigh way and it couldn't be the effort of keeping up with Tess; a person didn't have to keep up with her own niece of not twenty. Anyway she wouldn't mind putting her head back and closing her eyes for a minute or two while Tess carried on with her *Four Georges*. The deck-chair seemed surprisingly comfortable. Mabel moved her head once or twice

and opened one eye, just to show Tess, but Tess was absorbed in her book, Garth's pram didn't quiver and 'twas funny how tired she felt. A fourth yawn threatened and she slipped into it like sliding down the side of a cliff. When she reached the bottom of the cliff she just lay there, wondering about a bucket and spade for Garth but not bothering until she heard the sound of the sea. It was a sound one minute and the next it was a roar pierced by a shriek and shouts. Mabel woke with the deck-chair twitching beneath her. She got control of her jaw, closed her mouth and sprang to her feet. Tess was on hers already and her deck-chair and cushions were strewn all round her.

"A nice start you gave me, child. Why, whatever . . . ? 'Tis nothing but a car at the gate. Paddy! This is a pretty trick to play me. Oh, you and your games. Wait a second, I'm coming. Tess, you stop by the pram and try to settle baby off again." Mabel had to raise her voice until she was nearly shouting because the driver of the car was blowing its horn continuously. She ran to the gate with her hands over her ears shaking her head and laughing but the horning went on. There were four men in the car, two behind and Paddy sitting beside the driver, leaning across him to reach the horn.

"Stop, dear, stop!" bellowed Mabel. Paddy waved one hand to her and sprawled over the driver to get more purchase on the bulb of the horn. The driver, a sandy-haired youth with a light skin which had been sharply 'caught' by exposure to dust, sun and wind, suddenly went a still harsher red and began to remonstrate with Paddy. The two men at the back were trying to get cigarette tips into the flame of a lighter. They were being very painstaking and very unfortunate. The horn gave a last wild toot and Paddy, instead of returning to his seat lay sprawled over the driver. There was a moment's pause and then the driver said, "Hey! Get up!" and began to jerk him.

"Paddy?" snapped Mabel.

"Bartie?" retorted Paddy. The driver succeeded in getting him to an upright position and he looked helplessly at her.

"Get out at once, Paddy," commanded Mabel, and heard the patter of swift running steps behind her. She whisked round but Tess was already at her side. "Go on back, Tess," she ordered her. "Stay with baby. Now, Paddy?"

The driver of the car raked his throat and Mabel saw that he was keeping Paddy upright with a fist in his side. He looked through the windscreen in front of him as he spoke.

"Miss Barter, isn't it? I say, I'm ext'or'n'ly sorry and all that but I believe we'd better be getting on if we're going to make Town again to-night. Take your foot off the starter, Paddy, damn you," he snarled in sudden petulance.

"D'you mind, Bartie?" inquired Paddy, with a wild smile of mad sweetness which ended in a grimace drawn into a horrible squint. For a second or so Mabel could only remember how angry she had always been with Paddy for squinting and the number of times she had threatened him that if the wind changed while he was doing it he'd stay like that. Then the sandy-haired driver's brick-dust red cheek came between her and the hideous mask into which Paddy's face had passed. She nipped her lower lip with her front uppers and went a painful red herself.

"That's not what I mind, no, son. Yes, I think you'd better go back to London, and not make a stop till you're out of the county. Whatever you do, don't you pull up in Ringerton. Hear what I'm saying, Paddy, and you too, young fellow?"

"It's all his fault the silly ass," grumbled the young fellow, who had obviously been betrayed by the promise of a lark and now found himself with an albatross about his neck.

"There's no call to put the blame in one place when a blind man could see it scattered all round," stated Mabel with a dignity saved by snap and vigour from pathos. "I shan't bother to give Paddy coffee or a glass of water nor none of the rest of you either. Go on and don't make no mistake about the road and come back again. Good-bye, Paddy, though you're far from deserving it."

She managed to turn her back on the car an instant before it sprang forward and vanished behind the thick, high hedge of the bungalow garden. That wretched horning went on in crazy spasms all the way up the Barleigh Road. Mabel longed to put her hands over her ears again but she kept them rigid at her sides. Employing her most elegant walk she stepped over the garden back to her chair, the perambulator and Tess standing beside it bending over the baby.

"Tess?" she called, sharply, as Tess did not look up. Tess bent still lower and fussed with the baby's pillow. "Didn't you hear me, Miss?" snapped Mabel, and leaned over the perambulator herself taking up all the space so that Tess had to move. When she raised her head her face was scarlet. "I don't want to hear a word, Tess."

"I wasn't going to say anything, Auntie."

"I'm glad of that; I dunno when I've been so upset in my life. How'm I to know they didn't stop at the Ring of Bells on

their way up? If they did it'll be all over the village. Of course Paddy was led away but he'd ought to have known better, that he did. If he wanted to do that sort of thing he should have stayed at home."

"He hasn't got a home, really, now his wife is off, has he? It must be hateful to come back to nothing and start out from it in the morning."

"What'n the world do you mean? Paddy's got a room at his club where he's probably looked after a lot better than he is when . . . don't let me catch you talking nonsense again, Tess."

"No, Auntie."

"Suppose he passed the bus taking Het and Doll to the Fête? Like as not to have near run into it, and what am I going to say to those two girls? They'll just look at each other and not believe a word."

"Yes, Auntie."

"I'm surprised at you, Tess. If anybody'd asked me I'd have said your dad's daughter would be the first to be shocked. You stand there listening to me saying what I think, straight out, not attemptin' to stick up for my darling boy because he's in the wrong, I'm the first to admit it, and behavin' quite brazen, making excuses like as if that was the kind of thing you've been used to in your own home, not to mention dragging in his wife. Now no 'Percy' if you please."

"No, Auntie. But I do wish Paddy was happy."

Mabel, whose mouth was open because she had merely paused for breath, choked. And Tess patted her on the back. When at last Mabel could speak there seemed nothing to say and the wisest thing not to say it. 'Overlook', not a favourite word of hers, occurred to her and she seized it like a lifebuoy. What with her Ministry and the chance of Exeter or Salisbury, not to mention a lot of rubbish like students' tickets for books above her head and prizes for going to lectures on things any sensible girl stopping home could learn from her mother, Tess had got far too perky but the peg or two she needed taking down had better be negotiated by somebody else.

"I could do with a cup of tea," announced Mabel, wiping her eyes. Tess nipped in and made it and then the baby woke. For the first time he was fractious and refused to be soothed, filling most of the evening with indignant complaints for which no remedy could be discovered. Tess (you had to give the girl her due) did not try to take him and Mabel struggled alone with a child who

reminded her with increasing sharpness of his daddy. The remainder of the week-end passed on a subdued note. Tess read her book and didn't seem to want the radio for its Saturday night programme. The next morning she went to church by herself and at dinner after it explained that she'd got to go home in the evening, Miss Maynard had been so good letting her off on Friday that she must be right on time at the office Monday morning. Mabel had spent the morning with a still querulous baby and was in the mood for a light relaxation of severity. She was indeed prepared to go so far as to ask why Tess fancied Paddy wasn't happy. But Tess gave her no opportunity, her thoughts appeared elsewhere and she remarked that she would start early for the station so that she could look in at Seven, Bell, and have tea with Auntie Doll who would be alone because Auntie Het was going to see Mrs. Moody's brother's housekeeper who had been at the Fête yesterday and got stung just under the eye which had swollen right up and turned first purple, and then green. Although Mabel had her own opinion of Mrs. Moody's brother and his housekeeper she wasn't best pleased at Tess having the news and, what was more, keeping it to herself until that moment.

"I don't hold with all this chattering after church," she announced, stiffly, and then was committed to rigid severity again. When Tess went off at last half an hour before she need have done she knew she had only herself to blame and blaming oneself is the bleakest of human recreations. After Tess had vanished round the bend of the road she still remained at the gate staring after her and then what should happen but that aggravating chap Stan Hawkins appear at the spot where Tess vanished. Mabel turned her back on the gate at once but something pricked her; after all she and Stan had been at school together although few, seeing the difference between them now would credit it. And he actually had the sauce to call to her. So she swept round and frowned at him. The frown, which was assumed, taking on uncomplimentary reality she inspected the figure of fun he was in his new, awkwardly-shouldered Sunday suit. What did Stan want with a new suit in times like these? The fellow couldn't be going courting at his age?

"What's the matter, Stan Hawkins?" she rattled out.

"Good afternoon, Mabel," said Stan, carefully; he had evidently put on Sunday manners with the suit. "I've been wondering if I should've heard from you."

"Whatever for?"

"Matter of cleaning out all pipes and gutters, and attending to

boiler and cistern. Mrs. Howland sent me a card day before yesterday. Been abroad, hasn't she? She said she couldn't remember if the order for reg'lar attention had been placed or not, and I reminded Morris you'd never said. I thought maybe you'd have telephoned."

Luckily for Stan his tone was humble and his conclusion almost wistful. Mabel kept her eye steady on him while she simmered.

"I've had so many things to think of lately, I'd fair forgotten what I promised Mrs. Howland. And now I've been and torn up her letter. Can't for the life of me remember when she said she was coming. No use askin' you, I suppose, Stan?"

Stan looked at his feet. If he looked down he couldn't very well do anything else. Mabel nearly passed a remark to that effect and nearer still yielded to a violent desire to clip one of the ears under Stan's Sunday cap. He was avoiding her eye and she couldn't but guess the reason. He wouldn't say a word to make her give herself away and he wouldn't say a word to a soul afterwards. You could depend on him, but also for being of all created creatures the most aggravating loon. Although she disdained the idea of having put herself in Stan Hawkins' power Mabel smarted under it.

"Never mind, I knew 'twasn't. I'll be hearing again in a day or two, I daresay. I'll say that for Percy—Mrs. Howland—she's good at writing. Yes, tell Morris to come in and do the job as soon as he can. I'll be ready for him any time after nine to-morrow morning."

"Mrs. Howland sent her card to me."

"What if she did?" Mabel paused a moment. Funny to think of Stan putting himself forward like that, he'd always seemed one born to a back seat and never knowing there could be anything else for him. The thought suddenly tickled her. She smiled and at the same instant Stan looked up. But his expression was not hopeful, it remained (or would have done if he hadn't been Stan Hawkins) resigned, even sad.

"All right, then, you come in. I'll have the dust sheets out as soon as ever I've settled baby to-morrow morning. Not that I look for you to make any more mess than Morris, Stan." She waited for an acknowledgment of her graciousness but Stan merely shifted his cap and fell a victim to a seizure of blinking. Oh, there was no doing anything with the fellow, decided Mabel, and letting him have a "Good afternoon, Stanley", of neat curtness she turned her back on him finally and flounced over to the baby's perambulator. There she settled down in her deck-chair to passionate con-

sideration of the news he had brought her. While Stan, with the flea she had sent him off with heavy in his ear, trudged scuffling his Sunday shoes, up the Barleigh Road, Mabel admitted frankly that he had done her a good turn in preparing her for a surprise by Percy, and then entirely forgot him.

Percy's return meant that she would take away the baby. Realization crashed on Mabel as though the idea had never occurred to her before. She'd lose the Little Precious who was hers now as he could never be anybody else's. His mother would come and take him over as cool as if she'd not gone off and left him to chain-smoking good-for-nothings. Mabel's special vocabulary lent itself generously to descriptions of mothers who neglected their children but none of the expressions at her tongue's beck relieved her pain now. She hung over the perambulator until a tear dropped on the spotless coverlet. Suppose she wrote to Percy and suggested her leaving the baby in the country for the autumn and winter? Do more harm than good, she decided, sadly, for love searches out love and she knew Percy's behaviour didn't mean she had stopped caring for her son. She was probably wild to have him again and undo all Mabel had done for his health and well-being. A car drove past the gate and Mabel shivered. She'd jump like that now every time she heard one. If Percy was coming the sooner the better.

The card which Percy had obviously written at the same time as Stan's and then mislaid arrived by the first post next morning. Laconically, Percy's scrawl informed all Ringerton that she had had a marvellous time and hoped to be down one day this week before she started on her new job. Lovely weather everywhere, she added, almost illegibly and peculiarly unnecessarily. Stan was making all his row and mess with the boiler while Mabel read it, and he didn't hold his noise to hear what she meant to tell him. The next day and a half were filled with Stan's nuisance, her peremptory treatment of him when he stopped it, and her secret keening over the baby. On the Wednesday at four o'clock, just as she had expected, another new and luxurious car drew up at the gate with Percy at the wheel and a girl sitting beside her. Mabel's heart sank too low for her to savour the surprise of seeing that the girl was Camilla Dering.

They sat still a moment, concluding some chat and Mabel took the baby out of his pram and walked with all the nobility of an advance to a sacrificial altar, across the garden to meet them.

"Hullo, Bartie?" said Percy, turning her head and revealing those eyes of hers a stranger colour than ever. She got out, came

up to Mabel and kissed her. Funny, Percy had never done that before and there was something different about her too, although for the life of her Mabel couldn't say what it was. She could only sniff a very potent and provocative scent as she silently handed over the baby. Percy took him and adjusted him against her shoulder. She didn't say a word or kiss him until Camilla started talking. Even Camilla had changed, Mabel noticed when she could spare the attention for her. She looked older and had achieved a new pair of eyebrows which contradicted the youthful curve of her hair round her neck and had obviously led her into the sophisticated black suit she was wearing. She remained, of course, not a patch on Percy but she had certainly gained something, an air, a suggestion of experience which Mabel summed up as nothing to please her mother. Then Mabel looked back at Percy who was quietly resting her cheek against her baby's head. It was too much to bear in silence. Mabel's defrauded hands twitched and she burst out:

"Have you come to take him away?"

"Can you keep him until the end of next week? The people in our flat don't leave till Monday and the new Nanny can't come in before Thursday. I'm engaging her by the week from the Infants' Nurse Institute but I hope she'll stay on. I'm sunk if she doesn't because of my new job."

"Surely a new job doesn't count compared with your own blessed child?"

"Like hell it does," replied Percy, simply. "One whale of a fine chance in the dress racket, I mean, business. You've heard of Arnold Van Dynn, haven't you, Bartie? Oh, well, he's the person who has sprung it on the dress world. No one would be able to compete with him only they've pushed him into Export. Unless he had a few pals in with him he wouldn't be able to sell at home at all."

"And you are one of his pals?"

"Maybe. If the Nanny's a total dud will you take Garth again, Bartie?"

It was not a question to be answered easily. The pain of losing the baby was now inflamed by a disturbance which circled round a core of alarm. Why was Percy ready to give the child up again? Had she secretly planned to do so? Her new job, Paddy's new job. Black money in them somewhere, Mabel could swear. Percy was wild, she'd always known it but this difference in her was dangerous, not to be ignored. She ought to have her baby with her to steady her.

"We'll talk of that when the time comes," stated Mabel with all her sharpness and dignity. "Now I'll get tea for you and Camilla and you can nurse Master Garth till it's time for you to go. Not stopping the night, are you?"

"No, we've got a date at a country club near Newbury. Dancing and sleeping and slipping back to Town in the morning."

"Isn't Camilla going to her mother at Coombe?"

"Oh, no, Mummy's in a simply terribly mess turning the house into flats. Besides I've got to get back to my job. I'm in a gadget shop in Knightsbridge." Camilla spoke very fast, in fact ran her words together until what she said was almost unintelligible. Mabel gave her the sort of look she would have liked to give Percy. The girl *had* made a sketch of herself, just as well perhaps for her mother not to see her. But what was her real reason for not going to Coombe? Mabel fixed the deck-chairs for her guests and went into the house feeling suddenly slow, weary and old. By the time she had made the tea it started to rain and they came in carrying the cushions, chairs and baby all mixed up, with the baby gurgling happily. Mabel managed to get hold of him again but he kept on wriggling to go back to his mother who didn't want him now because she was busy inspecting the bungalow, followed around by Camilla who had produced a nine-inch cigarette holder, out of which the silly girl was continually dropping her cigarette. Yes, Percy was taking a fresh fancy to the bungalow. A dull jealousy, grey instead of yellow, flooded Mabel as she remonstrated with the now indignant baby. The baby began to cry, the rain outside thickened and set in for the evening. Camilla turned on the radio and tuned in to a station which blared dance music. Percy snapped up the lights which somehow gave the place the look of a person with a gilt mask over his face.

"Precious little to choose between Master Garth crying and the noise that thing's making," growled Mabel, but neither Percy or Camilla took any notice of her. They were trying some queer step to the music, going round the room their faces blank, the make-up starting off them in the harsh, electrified twilight of the storm. It wasn't dancing, decided Mabel, more like people possessed by a devil there was no denying. Camilla was a little stupe but Percy was clever enough to defeat her devil if she wanted to. And she didn't.

CHAPTER NINE

SHE got hold of the gate of Seven, Bell, and that was something although for a minute she wondered if she'd have to lean over it and be sick. Voices sounded quite near—Mrs. Moody calling for Tommy and Tommy squawking from just beside her in the hedge; she gave the gate a little push but directly it moved the sick feeling overpowered her again and she had to clip it back to steady herself. She heard footsteps, a man's, in the road behind her and for a moment she thought they were Stan Hawkins'. She wouldn't mind if it was Stan. Great loon he might be but he'd notice she was upset and one snap would stop him asking any more questions. He'd stand there with her, giving her a chance to pull herself together. But it wasn't Stan. It was, of all people, little Frank Parks, and of course when she turned he wanted to stop and talk. She soon packed him off on his way but with a silly little fellow like that you never knew what he might make up when he got home. Nobody'd never seen one of the Miss Barters hanging on to her gate as if she had reached it after one too many at the Ring of Bells and suppose the thought struck Frank or through him his sister Gladys who'd got a tongue that worked like a wire in cheese and always had her knife into Seven, Bell, because she saw the Barters knew they were a cut above her. The scent of slander was reviving Mabel when she suddenly heard Lady Dering's voice as she had heard it just now on the telephone back there in the bungalow. The shocking turn that gave her made her fair dizzy but all the same the voice was quite clear and went on, a relentless record of their conversation.

"Hullo? Yes, Lady Dering speaking. Who? You, Mabel? How nice of you to ring me. Yes, yes, quite. Busy, of course with the alterations to the house. I'm practically permanently dressed in putty which does save one's coupons. How are you? So Camilla told me. She was down last week-end between jobs. The new one is with a photographer who is specializing in doing mannequins in export clothes. Percy Howland got it for her and it carries the most remarkable perquisites with it. How lucky these girls are, but of course they work quite amazingly hard. That's all right for an unmarried girl like Camilla but I'm sorry for the married ones like Percy. However she runs her flat somehow and she seems quite happy about that place for the baby. . . . Can you hear me now? There. Is that better? . . . Somewhere in Sussex, isn't it, a resident

Nursery in connection with that Infant's Nurse Institute? Splendid for a child whose mother can't give up all her time to him. I expect you are really rather relieved, aren't you? Are you still at the bungalow, Mabel? Is Percy coming down? Camilla said . . .” Unfortunately Mabel could hear her own voice, rough and rude, shouting:

“I don't care what Camilla said.” Then she jostled the receiver back on to its hook. When she found herself cut off her first instinct was to groan; her second to reproach herself bitterly. Why, why had she yielded to the desire to swank to Lady Dering by ringing her up? Ever since Percy came down for the baby she'd been feeling queer. Her empty arms and days teased her all the time. She couldn't settle to anything and contrariness developed even in her intentions. Instead of packing up at the bungalow and going back to Bell she stayed on and after about a week wrote every two days or so to Percy. The weeks went by. Not hearing a word began to get on her nerves. She did some pretty silly things to relieve her irritation, sending for Morris Hawkins, the Manager of the Gas Works, and the Electricity's head chap to show off to them; then this ringing up of Lady Dering. She stood stock-still for a minute staring at the telephone and after that the storm broke. She rushed into the room she had slept in, snatched up her things, dumped them on the bed, dragged her case from under it and flung everything in and out again several times. Then she rushed out of the house and down the Barleigh Road to clutch Bell's gate, lean over it in miserable sickness and put up her last fight to stave off realization of what faced her. But of course that was impossible for here was Het coming out of Seven, her eyes popping out of her head and her mouth opening before she'd so much as set foot on the path.

“Yes, it's me,” snarled Mabel, thankful in a way that it was Het not Doll, who might have made her cry. “And p'raps you'll take this case of mine instead of gawping at it like some silly loon. Yes, I've come back and I'm ready for me dinner which I 'ope is Doll's cooking, not yours. I'll tell you all you need to know when 'tis necessary. Now be careful of the case.” She achieved a dignified passage up the path, even managed a glance at the garden and a nod to Mrs. Moody and stepped in at the familiar door. What it cost her not to burst into tears nobody'd ever know and the effect of the effort did not melt in the usual way but left her with something hard lodged in the middle of all her feelings.

Dinner was as good as on the table and the three Miss Barters sat down to it, Mabel still wearing her hat. She couldn't eat but

she could use her tongue as perhaps she had never done before. Passing remarks edged like sword blades and pointed as spears she reduced young Het and young Doll to resentful mutters, a mere damping down, of course, of their mischief and inquisitiveness which would flare up at the first opportunity. Mabel stuck to her guns, her sword blades and her spears, grimly. In the middle of 'the pudding' she knew that the sight of any more eating would finish her and pushed back her chair but covered her retreat still fighting.

"When you two've finished one of you can go up to Garth, tidy and close it. Bring me back the keys and don't forget to turn off the gas and 'lectric at the mains. What next is the cat's business, not yours. I'd like those keys delivered before tea. I shall be up in me room and you can bring 'em to me with a cup, Doll." Turning a key on herself with that statement Mabel marched out of the room and upstairs. Here she would be for the next couple of hours. The narrow bed with its coverlet bleached and thinned by hundreds of washing days to a light, stringy ghost of its original stout 'honeycomb' weave invited her, but she shook her head at it, readjusted her hat instead of removing it and sat down in the shelter of the curtain at the open window. She listened to the clatter of those two girls talking at the door below and watched Doll set off down the path stopping at the gate for the excuse to look up at Mabel's bedroom window, and then hurrying off as if she had heard Mabel's silent apostrophe. Grimly, almost viciously now, Mabel set her lips and chin. She wouldn't do a thing, not send Percy a line nor one to Paddy. They were both in this, serving her so cruel. She wouldn't go near their place nor take any more trouble over it. If they wrote to her or made any of their 'Hullo, Bartie?' signs, she'd pay no attention. If Percy came down from London on her bended knees with the baby . . . but that Institute place had grabbed the baby for good and after Percy had asked her if she'd take him again. Oh, the nasty wickedness of the girl, no one would believe it who wasn't such another herself. When she'd had her cup of tea she'd . . . but no, there was nothing to be done. Except that come supper-time she'd have to speak to those two.

'Speaking' never has and never will, turn out as intended. Mabel started off valiantly.

"Now I can see quite well without Het goggling at me, that you're expecting for me to Say Something and let you have it to gossip about all over the village. Well, this is straight, you're not getting nothing, neither of you. I ain't one of those who can't

keep their mouths shut as you'd both ought to know by this time, let alone that when a person has her feelings . . ."

"That's right," put in Het, suddenly. "But straight's straight for one as well as another. There's no call for Doll and me to gossip because plenty's doing it already and don't need no help. You've been keepin your nose in the air up at the bungalow, Mabe, and all over the place . . . right out so far as Festerton and Brackenleigh—folks have been talking."

"Whatever'n the world about?" snapped Mabel, completely taken aback.

"Ah, that's telling," Het bridled, glanced at Doll, then out of the window from which those eyes of hers returned to give Mabel a look enough to make any sister's fingers itch to smack her face.

"Can't you say any more'n that, girl?" demanded Mabel, roughly.

"You let Mabe alone, Het," Doll broke in. "Seeing she's upset and 'tis no use worrying her. I wouldn't pay no attention if I was you, Mabe. What's said 'n' done's finished with not that that never stopped no tongues wagging. Try 'n' eat a bit or you'll make yourself ill frettin'."

"Frettin'?" exploded Mabel, and then there was a dead silence because neither Het or Doll took her up on cue. She looked helplessly from one to the other. Who'd have believed it, she asked herself, bleakly. She set the whole strength of her stubborn spirit against admitting the truth of what she suddenly realized—when one person lets you down there's always a crowd collects to join him. But her undeceivable shrewdness got the better of her. She picked up her knife and fork and spoke into the air above the heads of those two.

"There's several things I may be doing but only one's any concern of yours or Het's. I'm not going up to Garth again and I'll thank you not to poke nor pry for the reason. Now enough is enough and I've said all I'm going to, except that you two'd better look out if you don't want to catch what neither of you has ever liked. Give me another potato, Doll; this one's gone in the middle, and that's not the only thing rotten in this house," and, having launched the charred hulks of her burned boats on a tempestuous sea, Mabel forced herself to eat her supper.

After it she passed not such a bad night and felt better in the morning but also better able to realize the full implication of what she had done. Her stubbornness, however, returned to her, and this time it was reinforced by a temper which had dipped into

bitterness and matured in it. She had announced that she wouldn't go near Garth again and she'd stick to that, no matter what the cost. Shrewdness, helpless against stubbornness this time, told her however that her glorious defiance of reason would impress Het and Doll, others too possibly, for nobody in a West Country village can deny admiration to anyone who puts her pride before her sense and raises a monument to it. What Mabel Barter had said she'd abide by. She stalked about Seven, Bell, lowering her head as she passed through doorways and casting an eye into corners which had never excited her interest before. Not entirely consciously, she plagued the life out of Het and Doll. Up to now they had always been able to rely on the best part of Mabel's attention being reserved for elsewhere, if only the past of Wilton Crescent; now Seven, Bell, housed it as it might have housed a searchlight. The late summer passed into an autumn of ripe sunshine, soft, steamy mists which jewelled the flowers of autumn and summer too, flaunting colours everywhere, and the best crop of apples gathered this past five years, and still Mabel kept the house, refusing even to sit out in her deck-chair in the garden. She'd been, as she pointed out by innuendo of a brickbat type, as good as her word. Not a step up the Barleigh Road, not a postcard so much as to Morley Court. And not a word to her, she summed up in sore triumph, just as she'd expected.

"Yes, I reckon you've got what you asked for," agreed Doll, just back from the Women's Institute where she had managed to leave Het, whose temper the hot weather and the way Mabel was going on didn't suit at all. Doll dumped a basket on the table and sat down with a flump on a hard chair. Mabel abiding by what she had said and doing it indoors for the best part of two months would have tried the patience of a saint specializing in a gridiron or arrows. Might be her favourite sister but there was a limit to what a girl can put up with. She hadn't, when she came in, meant to speak straight off. But news was news and no harm in putting a little spice in the telling. "With people like Percy 'n' Paddy 'tis always out of sight out of mind when 't isn't worse. Still, seems a pity to cut off your nose to spite your face. You didn't notice Stan Hawkins pass the gate just now, I suppose? I ran into him just outside Liz Marsh's. He'd been up to Garth to see about the locks, put on new ones or fit the old ones with keys. Seems he's been hearing direct from Percy, who asked him to report, and he must have said he couldn't get in. I was going to tell him off but Liz Marsh came out and you know what she is. Get to the bottom of all the gossip in the place and there you'll find her. Besides Stan didn't

wait, never seen a chap move off so quick. Someone must be coming down to Garth. D'you s'pose it's Percy with the baby, and Paddy, too?"

'Never saying a word' is in Ringerton merely another way of stating that a voluminous reply has been produced. Now, however, it was the bald truth. Doll, whether or no she knew what she was doing, had stabbed Mabel through the bottom of the heart and put her tongue right out of action. She kept her head down and her eyes on the glinting whisk of her needle as she wove an exquisite darn in the discoloured heel of an experienced stocking, fully-fashioned in a variety of ways, if not in the maker's meaning of the term. During the past two months she had suffered, nobody would ever know how much, from her temper, and now temper was nothing compared to a new torment. Curiosity seized Mabel, sent red-hot pins through each of her veins, pricked her fingers as she worked, drove the fidgets all over her, gave her a taste of what it would mean to go on like this until she could find out something. She kept her mouth shut until supper-time and then she deliberately picked a quarrel with Het who had heard from Liz Marsh that Doll had met Stan Hawkins coming down from the bungalow and had seen him go up the Barleigh Road again half an hour later. Family life being what it is and the highly concentrated essence of it being what it was in Seven, Bell, everything the three Miss Barters thought and felt was exposed during the rumpus, which rumbled under their roof for a week and came to a sudden end when Het returned one morning from the village where she had been getting the rations and observed with a smirk that it was a pity Mabe hadn't gone along with her.

"Whatever for?" demanded Mabel, instinct warning her that there was something behind Het's smirk and as she had to find out what it was, no use flaring up at the girl for her aggravatingness.

Het's smirk settled and spread to the lobes of her ears which always turned radish-colour when she had anything specially tasty on her tongue.

"I was in the Solar Stores getting our stuff, having a word with Win Wood and her auntie over from Pinsford when a woman came in and Win's auntie gave me a nudge which she hadn't need have done for you couldn't have missed that woman nowhere. She was short, a real dump, with one of those great chests to her but, my, she was smart. Of course 'twas a bit ridic'lous in the country. High heels 'n' mink, like yours, Mabe, only new and a lovely colour. Short coat, more 'f a wrap and a toque to march and her handbag

had a bit of mink running round it, so'd the gauntlets of her gloves. What that woman must have cost as she stood. And she was nothin', really, to look at. Well made-up but her face was red, her eyes sorter starting out of her head, and you could have used the black on her hair for your shoes. You remember how we used to laugh at old Granny Miller and her chins? Well, this woman had just the same and she was soaked in scent, it fair came out in waves as she opened her bag and so on. She started talking to Olive Moore who came up to serve her and Mr. Burn had to come up too because she'd got wrong with her temp'ry ration cards. Down from London she was, she said, and staying at Garth on the Barleigh Road."

"Then sure enough they've let the place. What did I tell you, Mabe?" cried Doll.

Mabel gave her a look which contained a faint reflection of Het's smirk. The first she had heard of Doll thinking Garth was let. Doll and Het were a high way above themselves now. The realization steadied her, at last the cruel irritation of her curiosity was allayed. She turned her head and gave Het a pretty straight look.

"Let's hear some more about this woman," she said quietly.

"Well, I never." Het was obviously taken aback. She hesitated a moment and then obliged rather sulkily. "Can't say I liked her voice. You could tell she was used to shouting and had all she could do to sound refined. And her accent, it put me in mind of something I've heard on the stage. Dessay she's been an actrice herself, but how does she come to Garth? That's what I want to know."

"Why didn't you ask her?"

"'Pon my word, Mabe, whatever's come over you? Ask a perfect stranger a thing like that? And she didn't stay long enough for anyone to ask anything. When she noticed us all near her like as if we was listening she fair snipped Mr. Burn's head off and told Olive to send up her things, she couldn't wait and out she went catching that mink of hers in the door. The tug she gave it I shouldn't be surprised if it was tore."

"I shouldn't be surprised at nothing."

Het and Doll both stared at Mabel and their stares were almost too resentful to be suspicious. After the way Mabe had been carrying on, for her to hear a piece of news like this and take it as quietly as if she'd been told one of Doll's hens had strayed. Het did not attempt to mitigate a really rude sniff and Doll snatched her basket from her and hurried out to the kitchen where she could be heard making the sort of noise which generally ends in something being

smashed. Mabel left the room with Het alone in it and went up to her bedroom where she took down the curtains preparatory to washing them. The gesture held a subtle implication which perhaps she didn't realize herself. At dinner-time she talked not very much but in the old way, and related a favourite incident concerning the Wilton Crescent drawing-room curtains, worth nigh on a hundred pounds and lost at the cleaners for forty-eight hours, never been found most likely if it hadn't been for Mabel giving those wretched people no peace. She then pushed back her chair and invited Doll to hurry with the washing-up and go blackberrying with her. This dealt Doll a swish with the last straw. She flounced off, muttering, and Het started talking very nasty. Mabel took no notice, thus reducing Het to a state in which she could only flounce after Doll to quarrel with her. They were both of them at it when Mabel quietly left the house by the back and struck off across the fields.

She adjusted her step to the uneven ground and long, thick grasses pulling at her skirt, eased her hat off her forehead, wished she hadn't put it on and suffered a sudden flash of appreciation and understanding of the beauty round her. She overcame this at once. No sensible person getting into deeper grass every minute and noting that the brambles were at their old game of keeping the finest berries out of reach should waste her time staring at trees burning glory as no bonfire could, which seemed to have taken new curves to display their pride of autumn, at a sky high and blue enough to deceive a swallow about the season. Carefully skirting a ditch hidden by wickedly tall grass she located a promising patch of hedge and pulled down a hoop of bramble no one shorter than herself could have got near. She started picking and thinking things out at the same time. No one could pick blackberries faster, neater, or more skilfully than Mabel. As her fingers flicked from cluster to cluster stripping and relaxing at increasing speed her thoughts began to run like a film and gave her no more trouble. Her self-satisfaction was reinflated and her buoyancy returned. She had certainly scored off Het and young Doll and now she felt quite equal to making a few inquiries with a view to finding out if Het's hen-and-cow story about the woman in mink wasn't all made up, as well it might be, knowing Het and how jealous she'd always been of Mabel's mink. Just like the girl to take advantage of anyone feeling low. Mabel ducked back to avoid a bramble trail which nearly caught her in the face and moved along the hedge to a patch she'd only just noticed, which screened the gate into the next field. She jumped for a hoop waving above her head,

brought it down and with it a clear view of the gate against which a man was leaning.

Mabel let the hoop go and it flew up nearly taking her hat with it. At the same instant the man removed his own, made her a little bow and replaced it. Mabel waited. She grabbed her hat straight, shivered with gooseflesh, tilted her basket and lost half her blackberries and then got a grip of herself and opened her mouth to speak. Not a word came and the man leaning on the gate did not speak either. Simply gazed at her with those extraordinary eyes; everything about him just as she remembered, only somehow it seemed still more striking. The thick grey hair, the scar, the brows, the curve of the thin lips slightly forced as if he was trying to smile. She felt as if her mouth was full of ashes, realized it was dry because it was still open and gave a little croak. The man said nothing, just held that pose of his. Mabel's dry mouth suddenly felt hot with anger and then she saw that he was moving stealthily—his shoulders were curving round, that shrinking look she remembered was on him, his eyes were starting out at her. She had to keep on staring at him, there was nothing else she could do. He was playing her a trick, she knew it and if she could have got her voice she'd have told him so. Yes, if she could have spoken or moved she'd have soon setted him; as it was she could only stand there like a loon until down at the bottom of the field behind her a dog barked. Then she jerked round, losing some more of her blackberries and hurried out into midfield. She wasn't going to have anybody seeing her skulking along the hedge with that man standing there. Was he there still? What wouldn't she have given to be able to turn and see? The dog, a mongrel belonging to one of the Marsh children, came up leaping in and out of the grasses and barking louder than ever. She shouted at it and shouted down to the little Marshes at the bottom of the field. They came up to her too and she scolded them about their berries. Why were half of those in their baskets green? Didn't they know ripe blackberries when they saw plenty of them? Their mothers wouldn't thank them. . . . By keeping the children fidgeting and looking anywhere to avoid her eyes she could tell that there was no one leaning on the stile now to catch their attention. Henry Garth had gone.

CHAPTER TEN

MABEL wrote a letter to Percy and posted it before she could lose her nerve. She did not mention the baby but said one or two things which should give the girl several more to think about. She was very careful, of course, but Percy would understand. She wrote the letter in her bedroom and posted it privately. At once she started to wait for the answer. No answer came. It was some time before Mabel admitted to herself that it wasn't coming. She wondered fleetingly if she should write to Paddy, but knew at the same moment that she wouldn't. It was Paddy, really, who had hurt her so badly and love and refusal to forgive him battled within her. She enjoyed the battle, naturally, but the situation was serious enough for her to be obliged also to admit to herself that it didn't get her anywhere. She could hear nothing, say nothing and, in her self-imposed exile from the bungalow, see nothing. For a few days after her encounter with Henry Garth she had been glad of the protection the third item gave her, but in less than a week the torment of curiosity began again and now it was inflamed by fear and the beginning of genuine worry at not hearing from Morley Court. Just as if they knew all she was going through those two, Het and Doll, kept their mouths shut tight as traps about the bungalow, even the woman with mink wasn't mentioned. It was a put-up job between them, Mabel decided, angrily, and was just about asking herself how much longer she could hold in all she was bursting to let out when one rainy early-November afternoon she went into the post office for a two-and-sixpenny order to send Tess for her birthday, banged the swing door open and found it was being politely held for her. And looked at the point of a golden beard. Her eyes were drawn away from it to meet the mischief being rolled at her by a pair of enormous brown ones, while the owner of them, apparently making an absent-minded movement, gently rubbed first one ear then the other.

Mabel lost her head and gasped, "You——?"

"Call me Stevie," whispered the lips inside the beard, the point of which she could swear actually touched the side of her chin. But he did not wait to be called anything. Slipping past her he made a delicate clearance of the post office's three steps. It was a discreet ballet dancer's leap and the impetus of it carried him round a corner out of her sight. Vanished as if he had never been there at all. "Well," muttered Mabel, and nearly asked for a five

shilling order instead of the traditional two-and-six. "Well, now," she elaborated as she hurried round the corner she would always remember as Stevie's and inspected sharply the meandering street which eventually turned into the Barleigh Road. No sign of him, of course, but along here and up to Garth he must have gone. All Mabel's vows, cultivated stiffness of heart, radioactive resentment, obstinacy and dumps shredded and whirled away from her like dissolving mist. She muttered, "No use bothering any longer," straightened her back and tossed her head. She'd like to know what was happening up there at Garth, and she meant to. A ticklish job it would be because she couldn't go to call and ask, could she? A rising wind bringing hill rain down from the Barleigh Road heights replied that she couldn't. "'Course not," Mabel confirmed their agreement and put up her umbrella. She stepped out briskly under its shelter and a certain idea started to take on the roseate hue of the early dawn of determination.

She did not hurry its deepening. Her long spell of misery had taught her a new, sinewy sort of patience. Two days passed and the third she spent in the house which gave her an excuse to say she needed a breath of fresh air before she went to bed. She put on a rather shocking old coat (her mack had stiffened with age and now creaked) pulled up the collar (which being quite out of date rose to her cheekbones) and took her mother's old umbrella which was a disgrace now, of course, but still kept its peculiar slope. It could be carried so that if the holder bent slightly forward her height was disguised. Thus armed she slipped off before Het or Doll could come after her to shout something silly about the weather she was going out in. Of course it was raining but she was quite glad of it. Warm as toast she felt and the rain was thick almost as a fog up the Barleigh Road. . . . It was just as she came to the cross-roads below the bungalow that she nearly jumped out of her skin. A car suddenly hooted behind her. She hadn't heard a sound of it until that minute and the lamp picked her out as if a policeman had flashed his torch on her. She nipped sideways into the ditch, a nasty, treacherous one with soft edges which gave so that she went down on her knees. By the time she was on her feet again the car had passed, once more making no sound, not even a purr. She shook herself and hurried on. The hedge of the bungalow garden took form in front of her and then she saw the house. It was in complete darkness. This was suddenly marked by a thin yellow triangle as the back door opened and shut almost at the same moment. And then Mabel saw that car parked under the

high hedge of the field on the other side of the road. Its lamps had been switched off and standing as it did in a slight inward curve of the hedge was as good as hidden.

"I don't like this," Mabel spoke aloud. Very loud indeed her words sounded and she hesitated a minute before she walked towards the car; although she sensed it was empty she didn't feel like taking chances. She turned to have a good look at the bungalow and it not only remained in darkness but gave the curious and distinctly creepy impression of being somehow in hiding too. Moreover not a sound came from it and Mabel was more disconcerted by that than anything else. If a window was open anywhere—and surely one must be—she'd have heard *something*. She stepped across to the gate and put her hand on the familiar bar. Far away over the top of the hill she heard the horn of another car. She asked herself why in the world that should be the thing to upset her but as she put the question she was hurrying, in fact as good as running, back down to Bell, realizing thankfully that she couldn't have been out long enough to start Het or Doll on their inquisitiveness.

"Enough is as good as a feast," she informed the reflection in her small looking-glass, frowning at the tousle wind, rain, speed and surprise had made of her hair. And at once began her stealthy approach to the rider, "but a feast is better." Before she fell asleep she was wondering whatever next and when she woke in the morning to a real nice-for-November day her first thought was that it would be sure to bring someone out of the bungalow. Henry Garth, if he was still there, or that Lily (somehow Mabel felt convinced Lily wasn't there) or Stevie or whoever'd come in the car and perhaps not gone away again. *Who* was up there at Garth now? Yes, and what were they doing?

"Like to come along to Mrs. Williams and see if she's got some apples?" Doll invited her at breakfast. It was a touch-last from the finger of Fate. Mrs. Williams lived on the Barleigh Road, the cottage before the cross-roads. No, decided Mabel, she'd do no going along with Doll, she'd slip up the Barleigh Road again by herself, this evening, p'raps. If you'd made up your mind no use leaving things.

She left them no longer than the fall of a clear dusk. Although she started up the road she suddenly decided to cut into the fields and approach the bungalow from the back. She reached it in half the time it would have taken her by the road but she'd forgotten how high the hedge behind it had grown. She couldn't see anything but the roof and chimneys so she passed on to the short length of

green lane a few hundred yards above it. She slipped round a great old elm into this and her breath escaped her in a "Whew!" The lane was blocked solid with parked cars not one with its lights on. Whipping her coat as closely as she could about her she slipped between the first two and peered into them. They were not only empty but gave the impression of featuring their emptiness. The next two were just the same except for a half-folded map on the driver's seat. Four remained in front of her and she had just negotiated mudguards which practically touched and stepped up on to a running-board when she heard a woman's loud, vulgar screech of laughter. It turned her blood cold, of course, but that was not all it did. It gave the signal for a burst of noise, talking, arguing, six or seven voices going together and then suddenly the slam of a door and complete silence. A horrid silence.

"Here, I'm getting out of this," Mabel muttered to break it. In the middle of the clutch of cars she had to choose whether she would go forwards or back. The cars seemed to have drawn closer together. She'd have to be nippy and careful and it would take some time. She only hesitated a moment but in that moment the bungalow door opened and the owners of the arguing voices came out. They did not speak now but the thudding of their feet on the heavy ground, the urgency of their movements, were registered by all the cars round Mabel. They'd be on her in a minute, she could hear someone running up the lane now.

It was the tightest corner she'd ever been in, and two men got into one of the first cars while she was still as good as trapped. She scraped desperately round the last mudguard but before she was clear of it the driver of the first car switched on his headlights for a minute and she saw Lily, dressed in her mink, just as Het had described it, standing with a man beside her. An instant before the headlights were switched off again Henry Garth, a hat pitched low over his forehead, came into the beam. Mabel was conscious of wrenching her foot as she stumbled over the roots of the great elm tree to safety. She didn't feel any pain until she left the treacherous earth of the field for the road, and then her ankle began to ache quite shocking. She limped in at Seven, Bell's, gate and told Het and Doll what she thought about the Council which could put up the rates enough to drive people out of their homes and leave the roads in such a state it wasn't safe to set foot on them after dark.

"That's right," agreed Het. "So Father Burton-Brown was saying only half an hour ago. I stepped out down to Lizzie's

and met him. He says the Vicar's going to take it up with the Council about that bit in front of the church. Heathen rubble, no more nor less, that's what I said to Father B-B and he laughed."

The shock of Het's amiable agreement, the undeniable deepening prick of anxiety as to whether she had been seen up there and the increasing pain in her ankle all joined together to oblige Mabel to admit that she'd had a pretty sharp lesson. It took two days' rest and ten days' hobbling to get her ankle right and she wasn't sorry for the excuse to stop indoors. When she went out again she turned towards the village without so much as looking up the Barleigh Road. The days and weeks went on and Christmas, in its usual way, threatened suddenly. Quite early in December a parcel arrived from Fortnum's for her. It contained a bag, a perfect beauty which must have cost pounds. Scribbled on a card was 'Love from Paddy and Percy'. And she knew that was all she was going to hear from either of them. . . .

Mabel had never cared much about Christmas and this year she lost her taste for it entirely. Het and Doll always worked themselves up over socials and parties and Women's Institute activities and now they fair got on her nerves. It was clatter-chatter from morning to night and it seemed as though Doll would never finish the knitted-wool rabbit she was making for Mabel to send to Master Garth, the poor Little Precious. Packing and dispatching the rabbit (to Morley Court, with nothing but 'Love from Bartie' on a half-sheet of paper) just about finished Mabel; however she managed not to let on, chiefly because neither Het or Doll would have noticed if she had, and that was the end of any Christmas for her. As it happened it marked the beginning of special festivity for Ringerton. The Women's Institute always gave a party for mothers and children and this year it decided on the Church Hall with a line of fir trees down the middle of it. This was announced in the local paper as the 'Fête of the Forest of Trees', and it was not until the members saw the title in cold print that they realized what a lot of extra work they were in for. The Fête was to be held on Christmas Eve. Directly after breakfast Het went down to the Church Hall to start fussing and directly after dinner Doll prepared to join her.

"You're coming along now, ain't you, Mabe?" asked Doll, and finally decided Mabel.

"Not if I know it," she retorted savagely, and went upstairs to her room to wait for Doll to be clear of the house.

It wasn't that she wanted to go up to the bungalow. It wasn't that she didn't stop at the cross-roads in half of two minds about turning and going back. The country in all its winter shades of grey, the horizon stealthily shortening in mist, had the peculiar muffled look so often characteristic of the Christmas octave. It was mild, even sticky and yet a cold wind whistled in and out of the hedge and stung the signpost. Mabel pulled up her fur tie, felt her coat to test the buttons in their holes and asked herself, practically, whether whatever she found or didn't find up at the bungalow wouldn't upset her all over again? Then she went on.

This time she walked up to the gate and opened it in the ordinary way. But memory, inflamed by the rigours of the season, suddenly overcame her and she stopped with the gate half open to see the garden in that hot late summer with the deck-chairs out and Master Garth's pram, the canopy just beginning to twitch with his waking movements. "Never know a time like that again," she told herself, luxuriating in the implications which lapped round the word 'never'. At the same moment she was diving into her bag for the bungalow keys. The locks had probably been changed but there was just the chance they would work so she had brought them with her. In at the front door she meant to go if it was any ways possible. She stepped up the path with all her old de Grey service grace and the key ready pointed. Into the lock it went, turning as sweetly as ever. The door swung back and Mabel stepped on to the smart rug, silver, with the look of metal but soft as swans-down, how often hadn't she shaken it? All the doors in front of her stood open and from the kitchen came the sound of two voices, arguing, going together. Well, of course, she could have slipped out and round to the kitchen window at the side of which one could peep unobserved . . . but she had promised herself to march in on anybody. So she unconsciously made the gesture of just lifting her skirt in front as she stepped off the silver rug and, noiselessly as the de Grey parlour-maid who had trained her used to move when necessary, walked straight into the kitchen doorway. In the kitchen was Paddy, his back towards her as he played about with something in a saucepan on the gas cooker. Sitting on the kitchen table was Camilla. She was smoking and lighting another cigarette at her own. Mabel watched her slide off the table and go up to Paddy to put it in his mouth. Her arm slipped round his shoulders and she stood there leaning against him, her head drooping, her fair hair swinging closer and closer to his neck until finally it fell round it as if it was his own.

Mabel turned and went away as noiselessly as she had come. She let herself out of the front door, hurried down the path and was through the gate as though someone stronger than herself took her. When she was outside she just gulped, "Paddy." She'd go straight home, but how she was going to stop there she didn't know. No more peace for her now. All the goings-on at the bungalow; Henry Garth, Lily, Stevie and their crowd hadn't mattered a whistle compared to this. Ought she to go back and flare out at Paddy? The question caught her at the cross-roads where the signpost seemed to be shuddering in the sport of the rising wind. No, she couldn't go back. Not until she'd either calmed down a bit or whipped herself up to the sort of temper which would carry off any situation. At the moment she shuddered with the signpost between the two states. She was helpless. So was Paddy in his weakness. Oh, cried Mabel to the gathering gloom of Christmas eve mist, whatever had made Paddy so weak? That day when he came to the bungalow as good as drunk, and now this. There were those who had a lot to answer for but did that help? Paddy, up there staying with that sly, good-for-nothing little Camilla. . . .

"I'll tell Het enough to make her write to Lady D. and have the girl home." The idea accompanied Mabel back to Seven, Bell, but she knew it would evaporate as soon as she got there. A word to Het and the fat in the fire would be up spluttering in everybody's eye. Whatever she suffered she must hold her tongue and she guessed pretty well what she was going to suffer, but perhaps it being Christmas eve with all its memories of Paddy's socks hung up (that once a stocking of her own, and the time his daddy gave him his first Meccano, a big pillow case) made it worse. She lay awake, sniffing most of the time all through the night and when morning came had only one thought in her head. She couldn't go to early service like she generally did with Doll, nor to the Carols with Doll and Het, always the three of them together for that. She'd got to get up to the bungalow as soon as ever it was possible.

It was possible while Het and Doll were doing the washing-up after breakfast. Early, too early. Like as not those two would still be in bed. The thought occurred to Mabel in all innocence and it was almost a surprise to feel her cheeks burning. Oh, she'd get them up all right, she promised herself, setting out into the absorbed silence of Christmas morning. It was the hour between bell peals and her heels made an oddly sharp sound on what looked like the mud of the Barleigh Road. She was nipping past the cross-

road signpost in less than ten minutes and quickening her pace all the time. As she hurried she scolded herself. Whatever had she been thinking of not to go for those two when she found them yesterday afternoon? A nice chance she had lost. Never mind, she'd make up for it now.

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A gleam of grey-yellow sunlight came out just as she reached Garth. The house responded to it and didn't look so bad although all the blinds were down and the sitting-room ones crooked. As Mabel pushed the gate it creaked, the first time she had ever known it do so. It went back at the same instant the front door opened wide. Percy walked out of the bungalow into the grey-yellow sunshine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PERCY walked down the path, her eyes holding Mabel's. She was wearing a town suit, had a top-coat over her arm and carried a hat. Her crest of hair waved in the wind and she wore a virulent lip rouge, faintly smudged at the tip of her mouth's bow.

"Well!" Mabel exploded, "Now what's happened? Where's Paddy and . . . and Camilla?"

Percy arrived at the gate and put her hand on it. Mabel found she was on the wrong side and it was being shut against her.

"What are you doing, Percy?" she demanded. "Why shouldn't I? . . ."

"I'm sorry, Bartie, but I'm in a hurry. Hugo Hallam, Bob's brother is due any minute to fetch me. Is there anything you want? Paddy isn't here, he left last night."

"When did you come?"

"About one o'clock this morning, I suppose it was. Started from Town at ten. I wanted to see Paddy but he'd gone."

"Gone with Camilla."

The top-coat slipped off Percy's arm and she bent to pick it up. Then she opened the gate wide.

"You had better come in. But I warn you I may have to go before . . ." she stopped and they both listened to a far-off horn. "Five minutes will do," Percy added.

"Not for me," snapped Mabel. Percy turned and walked back to the bungalow. Mabel had to run to reach her side. "Look here, Percy, I've got to know all about this," she began to bluster.

"Come in," said Percy, colourlessly. "We'll leave the doors open because of Hugo."

"Yes, so it seems. Going back to your first husband's lot, are you? I'm not surprised, not at nothing. No wonder about Paddy," gabbled Mabel, wildly. Percy stopped in the doorway and leaned against it.

"Must you shout, Bartie?"

"Why shouldn't I say out loud what oughter have been said long ago?"

"Do you want to go in or stay here?"

"What's your game?" demanded Mabel, rudely. "Not that I care. Only about Paddy. And what's the good of that now he's gone off with Camilla?"

"I think you've got it rather wrong. Paddy may hold hands here and there but he's safe enough. As a matter of fact he's perfectly well able to look after himself. I discovered that when I was—doing a whole lot to protect him from something else."

"You've been a fine wife to him, haven't you?"

"Yes, I guess I've been just what you mean," said Percy in the same quiet colourless voice. "What else do you want me to say, Bartie?"

"Just as though it's any use talking," gulped Mabel. "Truth is, you don't care whether Paddy's gone with Camilla or not. Percy, whatever would your own mother say to you?"

She might, instead of asking an old-fashioned stock question, have whipped Percy off the doorway. The girl was in front of her, eyes strained wide and blazing, lips quivering the paint on them making the pathetic movement into something like a threat.

"No, thanks, Bartie, we won't bring my mother into this."

"Why not? Eh?"

Percy stood there in the same attitude but everything about her changed. Her eyes narrowed until the lashes played her gaze and hid it, her mouth steadied to the line of self-control. Mabel told herself, suddenly, "I've gone too far. . . ."

"Move, will you?" asked Percy, almost casually. "We'll go into the sitting-room."

She kicked the front door shut. "When Hugo comes he can horn for me. I realize now that you ought to know a few things. You met my father, didn't you? What did you think of him?"

It was Mabel's turn to stop in the sitting-room doorway, but Percy gestured her into the room and slammed that door too.

"Go ahead," she commanded. "I'll get that before I tell you any more. Sit down."

Mabel sat down on the arm of one of the great chairs. She dared not trust herself to drop lower. "Cigarette?" inquired Percy, but it wasn't a question, it was a mere brutal snap. Mabel had had little to do with relentless decision, but she recognized it now. Percy lit a cigarette of her own, taking no notice of Mabel's stammer of refusal. Her lighter flashed as if it was illuminating her words.

"I'm still waiting, Bartie."

'Bartie' coming just then, overpowered Mabel.

"Well, I dunno," she stammered desperately, blinking at the lighter. "I only happened to see him once—once to speak to—and I'm sure he made himself very pleasant. You can't judge of a person . . ."

"I'll say you could and I'll say you did. Thanks for letting me know. Yes, he was always like that. Not that I remember him as a child. I lived with my mother until I was eight. Then he came down to us—we were in the country near Bexhill—he came three times and after the last one my mother died of a heart attack. When I got over it I went to school. Quite a good one but too fancy and the headmistress fell for Papa so he did what he liked about taking me off for week-ends and treats, and sending me places with one of the junior mistresses who had fallen for him too, in the holidays. He over-played the marvel parent but nobody seemed to notice. I took what I could get, naturally, and by the time I was out of school and the war came I was quite keen on the show he put up."

Percy sat down on the arm of the chair opposite Mabel's. The metal polka dots on the wallpaper seemed to be revolving round her crest of black hair.

"When the war came there was more money about than ever. Papa was always vanishing and coming up for air with his pockets stuffed. I wasn't particularly interested because I was getting married to Bob and he seemed to have plenty. Then Bob got his and I took a job. Papa was doing one of his vanishing tricks. I couldn't get at him. When he turned up again I'd heard one or two things from one or two people so I knew better than to ask

questions. After-the-war started and was simply wonderful for him. By that time things were dropping out of the bag. I let 'em lie—except once when I did an errand for him to a funny place down the river—and burrowed into my publicity job. I'd met Paddy and guessed I was probably for it. You don't believe it so you needn't say you do but I fell one hell of a whop for Paddy."

"'Course I believe it. I saw what you were and who you were used to that day at Revel's. I knew Paddy wasn't your sort so you must have been in love with him."

"Damn smart of you, Bartie." Percy's voice was ugly, thought Mabel, slipping one hand down to steady herself on her perch. "No, I don't know why I'm surprised, I've always appreciated you. In fact I pointed out quite a lot to Paddy. Yes, I made up my mind to marry him. All bright and innocent I started out with Papa giving me whatever I wanted and me only having to ease it on to Paddy who never asked questions anyway. There was this bungalow and the flat—the rent nipped up twice and I never told him. I kept him out of nearly everything. I adored him, that's why I let us start the baby. . . ."

"You don't know what it means to adore," gulped Mabel.

"All right, I don't. But I know something else very funny. Jealousy. I was so busy with Paddy and the job that I forgot quite a bit about my papa. He was on a ticklish spot, his nerves weren't good and that rattled him. So he took to Lily and married her.

"I didn't really mind Lily," Percy went on, slowly, with the faint stammer Mabel had noticed the first time they met. "I knew she was one of that lot but I hadn't an idea. . . . Papa looked a bit harassed at the registrar's but Lily had got a mink stroller out of him and seemed to have toned down in the right places so I just kissed all round and hoped for the best. I wasn't thinking of anybody much except myself and whether I'd been a fool to start the baby. D'you remember that week-end Paddy and I came down here and I was sitting out in the garden and did a perfect Edwardian faint? I'd just read a letter from Papa. He said he hoped he'd be all right but there was just the chance he'd be put away for a short one. Of course I knew what had happened; they had picked on him for their stooge pigeon. I never imagined he would have been the fool to let them, I thought he . . ."

"What's all this 'they'?" demanded Mabel, half in bewilderment, half in raw understanding.

Percy flicked ash between them with her little finger.

"It upset me like hell. Actually that was why I had to have

that 'under observation' spell in the home. Paddy was fidgety, of course he was in with the crowd too. Papa came to see me once or twice for five minutes or so; he always said he was in a frantic hurry. He didn't mention his affairs and he didn't bring Lily. When I was back in the flat I rang up their place to ask them to dinner, there was no reply from their phone and that evening at six Papa fell in on me." Percy got up and wandered over to the window to toss her cigarette out of it.

"We got everything fixed in a couple of days. I didn't know if that lag was safe but Papa ran himself down the river and hid. It was Lily's doing. She'd been tops to the whole show for six months. I believe she was quite fond of Papa but when the inner circle made to throw him out she as good as did it herself. We only just cleared the country in time. I didn't really know what the business meant until we'd had about a week in Belgium. Then the contacts popped up everywhere. We used to go for walks that ended in brasseries behind slums or on staircases. I went into some of the brasseries and saw them at it over games of dominoes. I threatened Papa I'd go up and down the staircases. . . . I tried to come home once but it was no good, he clung to me like a child. His nerve was going and someone threatened him with a job on the Austrian-Russian frontier. In the end we went to Switzerland and they passed us into Luxembourg and then back again. I had to help, he worked it by crying till I did—oh, Lord. . . ." Percy flung the window still higher, sat on the seat and swung her legs over. Mabel jumped up and ran across to her. Percy shook off the hand laid on her shoulder.

"When we got back of course things had changed. Paddy'd been a fool and grabbed hold of a job from one of them. He needn't have touched it. I was marked to go in with Arnold Van Dynn, I didn't mind that, real work if one liked to do it, and now Arnold has got a Royalty to dress he's trying to slip the web. Not much hope for him though. . . . I thought maybe I'd give papa cover by working at Arnold's, even thought, what with his nerve going and so on, he'd be able to slide out. And just then there was a leak."

"Why ever won't you explain yourself, Percy?" demanded Mabel, desperately.

"My good woman, either you catch on, or you don't. A pretty bad scare and that set a lot of wires tingling. The London lot split up, and Lily and Papa came down here. I let them blindfold me. I believed Lily had had her whack and was only doing stooge. When I heard I was wrong I came down to find out for myself.

Papa wasn't at home, only Lily and quite a lot of the boys. I let 'em have it and nearly got mine, one of the silly fools was waving a gun. Then I contacted Papa and told him I wouldn't have the bungalow used any more. He thought Lily'd kick but she didn't; she needed me to give her a hand. They've got a place near Barton now. Hugo's going to drive me there."

"You aren't moving till you've told me the truth about Paddy," shouted Mabel. The noise she made died down into a silence which crept into the marrow of her bones. Percy sat in the open window, a cold wind blowing her crest of hair backwards. Mabel saw her stiffening to attention and knew rather than heard the silence being broken by the sound of a car coming down from the top of Barleigh Hill.

"There's Hugo," said Percy, as she had spoken at first. "I must nip off at once. All right, Bartie, I'll give you what you're asking for and spill everything. You know the Imperial Hotel in Barton? Come there and spend the night this day week. I'll try to make it six-ish; if you arrive earlier order tea or whatever you want. Better not tell anyone about the date. Can you manage that? Right. Here's Hugo. Shut up after me, will you? Look round all you want; there's nothing . . ."

CHAPTER TWELVE

MABEL pushed the revolving door of the Imperial Hotel. The once-familiar big hotel smell greeted her. She walked through to the lounge to have a quick look round in the old way then back to the reception desk when she had had it and was prepared to give a sharp one to the clerk behind the great ledgers.

"Mrs. Howland?" drawled the clerk who manner was obviously fading out preparatory to going off duty. "Yes, two rooms for to-night, that's right. Communicating, we've been able to give her. No, she hasn't come in yet. Do you want to go up? O.K., you'll come along for your key later."

Hotels, even this Palace variety, weren't what they were, decided Mabel. The place had a desolate look which would once have only been emptiness due to seasonal fluctuations. Two more

lounches behind the first one emphasized this and so did the blare of conflicting radios and illuminated clocks with hands which sprang remorselessly at the minute. Mabel had a good look round and then went back to the vestibule and sat in the corner of a sofa where she wouldn't be so noticeable as in a chair. Presently she got up and salvaged a *Tatler* to hold on her lap. Not that it mattered, really. There was no one to see how she couldn't keep her eyes off the door. Suppose Percy didn't come . . . had never meant to?

Excitement and worry braced her at first but by half-past eight she knew she couldn't go on any longer without food so she slipped out and had a pot of tea and a sausage at a little place round the corner. When she got back again she didn't trouble to ask the clerk if Mrs. Howland had arrived. Grimly she sat down in her old place behind a small table, messy with empty glasses. It was an hour before a passing waiter whipped them on to his tray. He looked round as he did so. When he had gone on Percy stood in the middle of the vestibule.

Mabel gave three jerks and with the last got herself up from the sofa. She overcame her stiffness and raised her hand to show here she was. But Percy had been staring at her all the time. Mabel managed to moisten her lips which were so dry they seemed too hard to move.

"I'm going after that waiter," said Percy, "I want a whisky. Wait for me."

"I've been doing that. . . ." Percy was gone before Mabel got the first word out. She came back with what was very clearly a double whisky. A few couples of men had collected in the vestibule and they all broke off conversation or yawns to stare at Percy. Her hair shone blue as if it had been electrified, and the arum lily skin was brilliant as if that too was lit. But her eyes had lost their colour, they were no longer that strange grey but almost black. She stood beside the little table, raised her glass and drank half its contents.

"Won't you sit down?" asked Mabel, uneasily. "Have you had your supper, Percy? You didn't ought to drink hard on an empty stomach."

Percy nodded and tipped back the remainder of the whisky.

"I'm going to get another, then we'll go up. D'you mind?"

She came back in about ten minutes with a man following her close and humming as he inspected her hair and neck. Firmly Mabel took the glass from her.

"And give me your bag too, please, Percy. There's a lift in

that corner, you go and sit down in it and I'll collect our keys. Don't trip or anything."

"I'm not tight," said Percy, quietly. She turned and went to the desk for the keys and came back to lead the way to the lift. They went up in silence, leaving, it suddenly seemed to Mabel, the world down there below them. The lift stopped at the sixth floor. Mabel waited for Percy to step out of it and then saw that she was standing still in a queer attitude, one foot forward like a doll's. She was trying to move and couldn't.

"What is it, dear?" asked Mabel. She slipped a hand under the rigid elbow and at her touch Percy shuddered and shot forward. She ran down the long passage, Mabel running after her, the two bags banging and the whisky splashing.

"Whatever will the chamber-maid think?" wondered Mabel, but Percy stopped running so abruptly that she nearly fell on top of her. The chamber-maid appeared at the turn of the passage and let them into the luggage cubby and bath alcove belonging to a big bedroom.

"The room next hasn't its own bath but . . ."

"That will be all right," Percy snapped the chamber-maid. "Thanks. I'll phone if I want anything. . . . Thank God, she's gone. What's the matter with this room, Bartie?"

"Smells stuffy to me. I s'pose it's the central heating and the sound-proof business. And these double windows." Mabel drew back the curtains.

"Don't do that. D'you hear me?"

"Percy——?"

"Give me my whisky. You ought to have had some too."

"Never touch the stuff. Percy, what is the matter?"

"Let me alone," gasped Percy. She was holding on to the foot-board of the bed, swaying. Then she got control of herself again and sat down on the eiderdown which rose in deep pink puffs all round her. There was a small bump and the whisky glass rolled over the floor at her feet, what was left of its contents tracing a dark glistening patch on the light grey carpet. Percy stared at it.

"I might order some more, I couldn't get tight to-night if I tried. Bartie, I've just come from the house on Barton Meads. That place I told you about."

"Yes, you went there last week, didn't you?"

"Not to stop. Hugo drove me back to Town. I came down again yesterday. Had to because of trouble but I knew I shouldn't do any good. When I got there they were all going mad."

Mabel stooped for the whisky glass which had rolled as far as her own feet. She set it down on the dressing-table and went firmly over to the bed.

"Look here, Percy, we've had enough of this. You won't tell me what's the matter and you do nothing but go on in this wild way. I can see something's up. . . . I suppose it's the whisky, otherwise I'd say do you feel faint?"

"I'd love to. Don't come too near, it makes me feel I can't breathe. Mad, absolutely, every one of them. I wouldn't have gone near the place again if it hadn't been for Papa. Lily had a call this morning and went off with some of them. It was no use trying to calm Papa. Things had gone too far. Lily came back about nine with a pack of them. Stevie was in it. I never minded Stevie really. They said he was clever but I think—thought him just a fool. He started being messy as usual, poking his fingers around and saying 'darling'. I hardly noticed at first, Lily was talking and the news was coming through so black some of the fools didn't take it in. All at once I felt Stevie's beastly finger and I turned round and bopped him. Chair I picked up. . . ."

"You—you hit him?" stammered Mabel, stupidly.

"Leg of the chair caught the side of his head, the temple, it must have been. Hell flew loose, of course, there's nothing to be done when Lily throws the red sponge in. I ran out and jumped into my car and came here. Give me my bag, will you?"

Mabel handed it to her; she dug in it feverishly but brought nothing out. While her head was bent Mabel made one or two efforts to speak. At last she managed:

"You'd better have something to eat. I'll go down and . . ."

"No, stay here. Eat? I'd be sick if I saw a plate. You haven't got a flask about you, I suppose?"

"Percy, I'd be ashamed to go on drinking like this."

"Not if you were in my shoes, Bartie."

The short, cold sentence, the thin, hoarse voice were someone else's, not Percy's. Mabel looked round her as if she was looking for a way of escape. Gooseflesh ran up and down her spine. Percy sat hunched in the billowing eiderdown. She was dragging it round her shoulders to protect herself against spasms of shivering. Mabel could hear the faint gritting of her teeth and the exclamations she choked back as they broke from her. Sweat came out suddenly on Mabel's forehead. And then inevitable instinct swept her. Percy in trouble was like a child. She'd got to be looked after no matter what she'd done. She couldn't be left sitting there in agony. But

Mabel hadn't time to make a movement before Percy, sensing what was coming, slipped with the eiderdown off the bed. She kicked it away from her, and then suddenly swayed again and made a blind grab for the footboard. Mabel caught her hand.

"There, dear, there. You are quite all right, just tired out. Let Bartie . . ."

"Yes, I'm all right, but for pete's sake don't touch me. Yes, I'm dead," a second's silence echoed the word and then Percy gave a faint hoot of laughter. She tried to make a movement to match it and stumbled against the bed. "Whacked. And I ought to go on."

"If you tried to you'd fall down. You are going to bed this minute. You'll be safe, I promise you, Percy," realizing the implication of her words Mabel gabbled them. "I'll sit up with you in this chair."

"I couldn't stand that. Sorry, Bartie, I mean, I'll be better alone, with you in the next room. Come in whenever you want to. I'll like to know you're around," her voice was like a sleep-walker's now. Suppose there was something wrong and she needed the doctor? Suppose next morning she was down with, say brain fever? The situation was so appalling that realization brought its own dreadful calm. Mabel found herself thinking quite clearly; yes, I must get her away somehow because she killed that Stevie. . . .

"I'm going to settle you, Percy," she said, firmly. "Now, don't fuss, it'll be quicker if I do. Your nightie in this bag? What you need is a nice hot-water bottle but we won't go ringing or phoning for anything. Here's your wrapper, wear it over your nightie. Good thing there's this eiderdown." The homely words came out in jerks and between Mabel's teeth. Terror was creeping over her now, but she fought desperately to hide it from Percy. Thank goodness the girl had gone quite helpless with exhaustion. Mabel practically undressed her and got her into bed.

"Leave . . . light on. No—out," she mumbled. Mabel hardly knew which she did. Percy's exhaustion was hers now as if she had caught it. She waited by the bed a minute and then dragged herself into the next room. She'd just take off her top things and her shoes and lie down. Feel like she did she might but there'd be precious little sleep for her with all she'd go to think of. Where was Paddy? Out of this, please God, but caught in what else? What had Percy told her last week at the bungalow? The shock of the sudden flash of Paddy's name, the frantic effort to grab at coherence for his sake gave her something like a violent push into unconsciousness.

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She woke before she could open her eyes and wriggled off the bed in panic. Yes, it was morning and what was going to happen now? She did not wait to slip into her dress or put on her shoes but scuttled heavily through the communicating door. The next room was empty.

"Percy?" croaked Mabel. The sound of her own voice got her going again. She padded up to the bed and touched the crumpled covers to prove to herself it had been slept in. There was a faint dust of powder on the dressing-table, you had to look hard to see it. A key snapped in the door and the chambermaid stood there staring in a funny way. Mabel mumbled.

"Yes, she's gone." She ran her hands up and down her bare arms to screen them and went as quickly as she could back to her room. It didn't take her five minutes to be ready. Nobody'd notice anything amiss except that she felt her mouth working a little. She went down by the stairs, wouldn't trust herself in a lift with her stomach heaving the way it was. When she turned on the bottom flight and saw the hall below her nerve steadied. She crossed to the desk and waited for the clerk to slip into place and finish yawning. Then she said:

"Mrs. Howland . . ." and waited again.

"That's right," agreed the clerk, innocently. "Left an hour ago. Bill settled to include breakfast. Having yours in the restaurant?"

Mabel felt a faint stirring of the old spirit to return snap for sauce and then the cramp of panic caught her. She twisted herself round, blundered into the revolving door and got out of the place. Stiffly she moved over the pavement and stood for a minute beside a lamp-post. It was a miserable morning and the few people about didn't bother to notice what anybody was doing. They shouldered past her in the sticky murk, a policeman on about the dullest beat in the city was amongst them. You'd never think, seeing the police on street duty, that they were the ones to hound people down. . . . Where was Percy? Had she just flown in terror or had she a plan?

"I can't think no more," groaned Mabel, and saw the policeman turn to look up and down the road, noticing her, perhaps, under cover of a stolid readjustment of his weight and the loud official clearing of throat which travelled back to her.

"Can't stop here." She moved off down the pavement in the direction of the station. Where else? She'd have to go home. Rain came on fast suddenly and she obeyed the instinct to hurry; no use getting wet through and she was shivering already, a chill wouldn't help.

She dived under cover and mounted the steep steps which led to the station niched on one of Barton's hills. The steps—she had known them since childhood—were like a sound box. Strange rumbles came out of the ground behind them, truck thunder rolled down from above, the shudders and clanking of the luggage lifts as they were loaded, from below. All the dear old noises which had always quickened her blood but now they fair bewildered her and when she reached the top of the steps she was glad to go along by the paper stall and stop behind it to get her breath.

A young woman was slapping the dailies out. There were very few of them and two or three men who were hurrying past stopped to take anything the young woman could let them have. *Express* . . . *Mail*, the last two were lifted. Both carried the same words in their headlines. 'Currency Smugglers.' The man who had secured the *Mail* stopped a minute to scan the largest type. Mabel, beside him, read, 'International Gang unmasked. Headquarters in England'.

At any other time it would have taken her a minute or two to get so far. Now the type flashed its meaning like a neon sign. The police had caught that gang. Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Austrian-Russian frontier . . . 'the contacts popped up everywhere' . . . 'the London lot split up' . . . 'a funny place down the river'. . . . No, no, she didn't want telling any more, she hadn't no need to read anything else. They'd caught Percy's dad and Lily and—they'd find Stevie's body. . . .

"How soon's the Ringerton train?" she chattered, grabbing the arm of a passing porter. The porter who was rubbing his face after some violent exertion lowered a dingy cotton bandana to stare at her. She'd better be careful. Could she trust herself? Paddy—if she thought of him again, was stabbed by the thought of him like that, she couldn't answer for what might happen.

Helpless. She got into her train and sat in the double darkness of a carriage under the station roof. There wasn't a thing she could do but sit there like a dummy while . . . something in her head seemed to click. Her imagination gave out. The train jolted and began to move, almost as if it was starting to slide downhill. She nearly screamed. Yes, she'd have all she could do to keep sensible. Her carriage rolled out of the station and she managed to let down the window and gulp some smoke blowing in on the damp air. All this and nothing to eat since that sausage yesterday evening. Not even a cuppa. No wonder. Lucky there was nobody else in the carriage. If she put her feet up? Reason eddied, and then drifted

away again like the smoke. No, she'd never be able to stay still. . . .

She as near as anything fell out of the carriage on to Ringerton platform. It was the station-master who caught her. She thanked him, straightening her hat and banging dust from her skirt with her bag. He had a nice face, she thought suddenly, as if she had never seen him before. Kind. She'd wait and have a word with him about the London trains. Suppose she was sent for and had to go at a minute's notice?

"Back early from Barton, Miss Barter," he stated, jocularly, and panic cramp nipped Mabel again. Someone talking already.

"That's-right-that's right," she jabbered, remembering thankfully that she'd kept her promise to Percy and not said a word to anybody about their date. She managed to cover the jabber by asking quite casually about trains. "May be going up to Town any time," he'd think that was swank and have his attention taken off anything else.

They walked along the platform together and Mabel wished him good morning quite jauntily. Then she went out into the soaking drizzle and started for home. To face Het and Doll, only that didn't matter any longer now. Home, Het, Doll, were midget objects set in the middle of a great grey wheel spinning immeasurable circles of disaster. And she couldn't let them know it, not by look or word or in a single one of those uncountable ways in which sisters living together in a cottage can communicate. She'd got to bear this agony and its core, her fear for Paddy, alone. When she reached the gate of Seven, Bell, the first thing she saw was a soaked folded newspaper someone had dropped on the step. She snatched it up and tore the wet sheets to get at the front page. No, it was last Friday's. What a turn it had given her. And yet, in a funny way, that had done her good.

When it started to grow dusk at five o'clock she knew she couldn't stay in the house all night through. She made Doll pour her the last cup of the tea-pot, swallowed it, cold and nasty-tasting as it was, and told her:

"I'm just going down to the village. If so be I should pop in anywheres and stop, don't wait supper for me."

"If 'tis Liz Marsh's you're going, she'd hadn't oughter have that leg of hers rubbed, the doctor said 'twould only set up more irritation," protested Doll.

Mabel nodded. Liz Marsh's leg was bigger now than any of the

other midget objects in the middle of the grey wheel. But it vanished with the rest of them as she stepped out of Seven, Bell. Far off on the railway track she heard the shriek of an engine and it was like a cry that just reached her. She ran down the path and went on running down the road until she got to the outskirts of the village. The commonest prudence obliged her to do no more than hurry through it, but she ran again when she reached the station approach. Maybe the news-stall was shut up already, if it wasn't all the evening papers might be gone. She'd got to see an evening paper.

Yes, the news-stall was shut just as she expected. Clear through all her disturbance came the satisfaction of having been right. She looked round, raking the platform for its chances and saw a man in a town overcoat and bowler hat reading a small sheet which could not be anything but the *Tolbury Evening News*. She did not hesitate a moment although she achieved a diffident approach.

"'Twould be ever so kind of you . . ." as she had felt certain the man was no one from this part of the world, might be the Midlands, Birmingham or some such place, caught by the Government's tricks with their trains. Not a real gentleman (recognition asserted itself even at this juncture) but nice enough. "Thank you, I'm sure," said Mabel, getting a firm grip of the paper. She walked away with it down the platform. Not a single light anybody could read by, but she wasn't Dad's daughter for nothing, not even though he'd been dead all these years. She found the one porter behind a stack of poultry crates and spoke to him like nobody else 'ud speak.

"British Railways you may call 'em and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. The light in the waiting-room's what's wanted, not the electricity left burning in carriages in broad daylight and a loud-speaker bawling about efficiency. If you haven't got a match, I have."

The incandescent gas jiggled and spat but she spread the paper on the table below it and got her glasses out of her bag. No one came on to disturb her and she was able to go through the whole thing properly. There was nothing in the headlines or on the front page. She turned carefully, running her finger down the columns. No, nothing. . . . Mabel forgot herself and licked a finger to turn backwards and study still more earnestly. The first time she had missed the Stop Press which was printed endwise to the rest of the type. She twisted the paper to read it. 'Fatal car crash. At midday to-day a car was found on the sands below Raymond Head Gap near Wilscombe. Driver and passenger killed. Have been identified as

Henry Dennis of the Bruton Club, London, and Mrs. Mary Percival Howland of Morley Court, London."

Mabel pulled at the nearest chair and sat down. She took off her glasses and read more clearly without them. Then she got up, tucking the paper under her arm and went out of the waiting-room. The signals were down for a train just due. It came roaring in, and she stood in the middle of the platform, head up, chin raised, drawn to her full height. Passengers and porter scurried round her. As the engine shrieked its warning the station-master passed her. Mabel caught his sleeve.

"I'm going up to London on the nine-seven to-night. My boy, Captain Howland, wants me. Mind and have me a facing corner seat kept." The shrieking of the engine only underlined her words. The station-master nodded and before he went on raised two fingers to his cap in salute.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MABEL came back to Ringerton in the middle of March. She came back with the baby, Garth. He was a big boy now and lively and wilful as anything so she had her hands full on the journey and didn't get a chance to look backwards or forwards. The train stopped as usual to waste twenty minutes outside Durnford Junction, and in between efforts to persuade the baby to watch another puffer-train go by while she tidied him up a bit she suddenly realized that she wasn't the same person who had gone up to London that wet January night. The person who had (although she'd never let a soul guess it) gone blundering into Morley Court after doing something a lot worse, which was trying to get Paddy at his club. The person with only one idea in her head, to comfort Paddy, and she'd had to learn, learn straight away before she did any fatal thing, that you couldn't comfort a man in Paddy's trouble, that feelings didn't exist in the terrible wasteland where he found himself. That he couldn't and never would speak of Percy's death. That she must spend day after day holding her breath, not letting out a word or sign in case it broke him altogether. Watching him whenever she had the chance to get some idea of what was happening, and then passing those fearful days alone in the flat

when he'd gone off and she never knew but the next thing would be she'd hear he'd been taken in custody. He came back with that look on his face and talked in a voice that wasn't a young man's any more. Just of arrangements and how she was to have the bungalow and Garth and he'd come down when he could, he was going back to his old Stock Exchange job, the firm had been extraordinarily good. . . .

"That's all right," Mabel had interrupted him. She knew she had stopped him for ever but what did that matter if it saved him pain? If she hadn't passed beyond feeling too, at least she could pretend. . . . Not a single question did she ask him, and there wasn't a word in the papers she got hold of; she schooled herself to something that once she would never have recognized as thankfulness.

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She had sent a card to Het and Doll to be sure to meet her at the station. Only natural, seeing she had the baby and all his luggage, but the truth was she'd avoid a lot of awkwardness that way. She stood in the corridor as the train ran in, Garth in her arms, her showing him Ringerton.

"There, my duck." If she'd had a moment before the train stopped she'd have been surprised at the warmth and triumph with which she announced it. Het and Doll, side by side, were goggling up at her. She stepped down, Garth at her shoulder, as beautiful a child as had ever arrived in the place, and there was the station-master looking at them, the porter, as he went by, too. Mabel's heart swelled. She wasn't one to think much of omens or that sort of nonsense but sometimes afterwards remembering that little station-scene she wondered if it hadn't, so to speak, marked a change in the wind. She nodded to the porter, had a word with the station-master on her way and went out with Garth crowing like a little king in her arms and Het and Doll with all they could do to manage what they had to carry behind her.

It was a good step up to Bell and of course the baby was heavy, but Mabel wasn't really sorry about Doll not being able to get the taxi on account of its having gone to a funeral at Festerton. No sooner were they down station approach than they started to meet people. Mrs. Pedder from the post office, Liz Marsh, limping and glad to stop for a word, Gladys Purdon *née* Parks and a Madge Hawkins, the Vicar's cousin who was doing secretary for him and Father B-B who was generally so terrified of babies that he dodged his christenings, but seemed to take quite a fancy to Garth. When

they reached Bell Mabel sat down in her mother's chair in the sitting-room to get the baby used to the house before taking him upstairs and neighbours began to drop in. Doll admitted them; Mrs. Horne and Mrs. Moody and one by one representatives of the whole terrace. It was a sight to see Master Garth as good as talking to them all, and taking hold of Mrs. Horne's basket, twitching it right out of her hand before she knew where she was. Laugh? Mabel thought Mrs. Horne 'ud never stop laughing. She nearly choked because all the time she was stooping to pick up the contents of the basket from the floor, while the blessed child watched her ever so interested. Then of course he suddenly got tired and had to be carried up to bed, Het and Doll, following with his things and receiving, over Mabel's shoulder, information about what he had been used to and would have when they were settled in the bungalow, which they very tactfully repeated to each other and thus relayed to Mrs. Moody and Mrs. Horne lingering just outside the door.

Settling in the bungalow was not completed for a month. It was delayed, although nobody knew it, by a week-end spent there by Paddy all alone. Funny, but Mabel had had a feeling he'd come. He sent her a message—you couldn't call it any more—on a half-sheet of paper and she knew what he meant. He wanted to be left to himself. She fair ached to go to him but her control and love held. She put everything ready and managed his food and was very dictatorial with Doll who might have asked questions. In the whole of that three days she only had two glimpses of him, one single catch of his hand. But when it was over and he had gone back to Town she felt stronger than ever. She'd have him down again, she promised herself, just let him get over the worst and then he'd turn to old Bartie. Old? Why had she called herself that? She frowned at her reflection in her small mirror. Its vigorous expression satisfied her. No beauty, she never had been and wasn't likely to start now, was all the assurance she needed. Age, far from withering, was bringing her to blossom. Instinct told her she was coming into her own, as not even at Wilton Crescent after Mrs. Howland's death, and she'd back instinct up all right. She switched her attention to the mirror itself. A poor, potty little thing it always had been. She certainly wouldn't take it up to the bungalow with her. And now she must give her mind to the business of the move.

By the end of April she was in the bungalow as if she had never lived anywhere else. From what Paddy had said it was really hers but she enjoyed it in a special way of her own. She did not alter any of the furniture. The place still kept its style as a smart young

couple's house. One bedroom was turned into the baby's nursery and his rug and pen were moved in and out of the sitting-room, where he played every evening after tea for an hour. The old-fashioned 'going down to the drawing-room' of de Grey days, something even Paddy had never known. Yes, she'd bring up little Garth to know what was what even if 'twould be more of a hindrance than a help to a child these times. And it would get around Ringerton, just as the state of the bungalow would be known and commented on. Mabel had never forgotten that nasty hint of Het's about gossip against her.

It was the prick from that memory which made her consolidate her position as she did. She wrote to Paddy to ask if he'd mind, and let him know that all she really wanted was to see him again. He sent her back another of his half-sheets with 'Of course' and 'See what I can do'. That was a bit better, she decided, although she did not really know why, and wrote to invite Dick and Jean and young Tess to come up for a long week-end. Dick and Jean came. Tess couldn't. She'd got her remove from her Ministry at Templeford and gone, not to Exeter or Salisbury, but to London. Kensington, if you please.

"We wrote you directly we knew. Early January that was," Jean told Mabel, looking at her rather straight. "Of course Tess ought to have wrote too but she's been ever so busy, sometimes we've had nothing but a card in a fortnight. She'll be sending along a line soon, I guess. When you answer her mind you blow her up."

"I will that," declared Mabel. She scented a smirk in Jean's injunction. Oh, well, of course it was natural she should be proud of her girl doing fine. And Tess had got beyond her, she'd feel that when she had a fit of the dumps, any mother would. Mabel, presiding over tea table at that moment, passed the beautifully cut bread-and-butter again and settled her mouth which had drooped slightly at the corners.

"I'll ask Tess down by herself sometime when I can arrange it. I'm having my friend, Susan, from Fulham next and there are one or two others I want, but I'll have to see whether visitors upset Master Garth. What is it, my precious? 'Nother piece of bread-and-butter? Wait for Mabel to fold it properly. There."

Susan, invited as soon as Mabel had a moment to herself after Dick and Jean left, came for a week and stayed ten days. Mabel didn't know when she had enjoyed herself so much. Dear old Susan was even better company down in the country than she was in town. She'd had a Devonshire girlhood, as an orphan brought up

on an uncle's farm and she took to everything as if she'd come straight from it instead of the Reddle Road. And 'twas wonderful the way you could talk to her. Of course Mabel had to keep dumb as ditch water about the terrible business but she wasn't sure, specially when they went on walks, wandering the May fields together, that Susan didn't guess a bit. Evening before she left the conversation skirted the tales she'd heard from a friend of hers who was married to an ex-policeman and had her second son of three in the Force.

"You'd ought to come with me once and get a proper earful, Mabe. T'aint what happens, Annie says, it's what never comes to nothing at all, in a way of speaking. How some of them scamps get away with it, and only just, when they are as good as caught, you'd hardly credit. Maybe it's as well in a way, for they always drag a lot down in with them. Nice enough young fellows who took the wrong chance. There's one I know, but he was lucky and he's got a splendid job now. Going overseas soon in the engineering. As often as not it's the women behind 'em all. What women do, Annie's Fred says, and once he starts you can't stop him. There was one special he was mentioning just the other day, sort you'd think no one could miss and she put it over them and got out of the country, he'd heard all about it from a pal of his who's quite one of the high-ups. No need to mention what I'm telling you, Mabe." Susan squeezed Mabel's hand in a very nice way. "When, as they say, a gang liquidates itself it's bad for promotion but it can save a lot of trouble. You see this and that in the papers and afterwards nothing seems to happen. When you can fix to leave Garth with Doll you'll have to come up to me and go around a bit with your Paddy. He'll be feeling lonely, poor young man, after that shocking business of his wife, poor girl, being killed driving her dad. No good to a young fellow to be lonely, still, I'd say, and no offence meant, Mabe, your Paddy's had his lesson."

"I'm sure he has, my dear," agreed Mabel, earnestly. She wouldn't have let anybody else in the world speak so of Paddy to her, far less confirm what they said. But Susan was different. And Susan had taken a weight off her mind. Of course it meant she must have let something slip out—she took Susan's arm, but she straightened up and changed the subject. Only, however, to how she would miss her and must have her promise to come down again.

"Seeing as how the bungalow's mine for good," she stated, proudly.

Susan gave the promise and laughed about the Reddle Road.

"You'll be too grand for my little place after all this, old girl."

"You go on with you," retorted Mabel, delighted.

"That's right, and tell Winnie and all I've been as good as staying at Buckingham Palace," chuckled Susan. She went off with a big basket packed to bursting with everything Mabel could give her. But she left a valuable gift of her own behind. Mabel had never relished her pride so exquisitely before. It was like a companion to her, a friend to whom she could turn when the least need of reassurance arose. She didn't worry about a thing, not even when she wrote to Paddy and heard from him that he wouldn't be coming down all summer. Very well, then, she'd wait for the autumn and by that time, at the rate Master Garth was growing now, he'd meet a son the same size as himself.

The summer slipped by before she knew it, and one morning, as she was settling Garth in his pram for his sleep, a car drew up at the bungalow gate. Mabel was just starting down the path to welcome it when she remembered her standing. As mistress of the bungalow 'twas for others to come to her. She remained, with one hand on the pram, even after she recognized the car and Lady Dering in the driver's seat. In the back of the car was a gentleman, elderly, but smart as a youngster. Mabel took her hand from the pram and coughed lightly behind it. The gentleman was now opening the bungalow gate for Lady Dering. She stepped forward, mistress and elegant maid in one.

"Good morning, my Lady," she announced, stressing the title which Lady Dering had always refused to use.

"Good morning, Mabel," agreed Lady Dering, who had the knack of suiting her manner to the occasion. She held out her hand. Mabel accepted and shook it. A fraction too late she remembered how she'd always told Doll 'twasn't the thing to wring a person's hand off. "I have persuaded Lord Richard Fitton to come with me. He has his flat at Combe now, as of course you know. Dick, this is Miss Mabel Barter who was as good a friend to the Howlands as our own Henrietta was to us. We came over to see your sister, Mabel, and she told up you were up here with little Garth so we called on our way home. Is that the baby?"

"Yes, indeed it is. How do you do, my Lord?" She didn't make her mistake again but bowed and caught an admiring twinkle. Well, she preened herself, nobody could say M.B. didn't know how to behave herself.

"What a glorious little boy." Lady Dering bent over the pram

in which the young rogue lay, sweet as sugar, blinking at her, his eyelashes looking lovely, pretending he was too sleepy to rouse for visitors.

"And knowing you wouldn't believe." Mabel forgot herself entirely for a few moments while she gazed in rapture. Then she was conscious of Lord Richard having a good look at her instead of the baby, and was obliged to toss her head a little. "He favours his father, wouldn't you say, my Lady? Not but what there's a look of his poor mother too. . . . Would you and his Lordship care to come in and see the bungalow? 'Tis just as Mrs. Howland designed it, decorations and furniture and everything. Very clever she was, a real gift that way. I haven't altered a thing. In memory of her, you might say."

Of course they'd only come to see the place. The firm smile she gave, first to one, then to the other, showed she knew it. But all the same she was flattered, and deeply, in a way that would last.

"You can stop for a cup of coffee, I hope, my Lady? I'll show you the kitchen where I can make some in a minute. His Lordship may like to look round the garden meanwhile. This is the big room, the sitting-room." She stood aside, presenting them. Wonderful luck she had given it that good turn-out last week and the furniture an extra rub only yesterday. She watched Lady Dering and Lord Richard admiring it in the quiet way those people do. They appreciated it all right. Lord Richard crossed to the Chinese cabinet and produced a magnifying glass out of his pocket to study it.

"We'll leave you to that, Richard," said Lady Dering, quickly. "Yes, I should love to see the kitchen, Mabel."

So she wanted the opportunity for a quiet word. I'm not sure I don't, too, thought Mabel and on the instant decided that she did, and would have it first. She opened all the doors they passed so Lady Dering wouldn't fancy there was any untidiness anywhere to hide, and then ushered her into the kitchen. It was her own ground and she took advantage of it at once.

"How's Camilla? Henrietta has the idea that she's down at Combe again. If she is and so be she can manage it I'd like for her to come over and see—Garth. And me." After a moment's hesitation she brought out the two last words and looked Lady Dering straight in the eye. Lady Dering returned the look thoughtfully.

"Camilla would love that. If I can save a little petrol for her I will. She's not at home now, but her new chief is very good about giving her week-ends. She has a job as secretary to a Member of Parliament. Didn't Henrietta tell you?"

"No," it slipped out.

Lady Dering, of course looked as though she had noticed nothing slippery about the reply. Her attention was caught by the enamel dresser and she went over to examine it. She went on talking, absently. "A tremendous thruster. I can't imagine how Camilla can match up to his requirements but it seems she's a great success. I'm extremely glad in several ways. Her other jobs were silly little affairs and most of her time was taken up with falling in and out of love. At first she found that exciting and then depressing. The depressing stage, I'm sorry to say, coincided with desperate proposals from a perfectly delightful man whose father was a great friend of my husband's. Mothers ought not to commit themselves, but I must frankly admit that I'd adore Camilla to marry him. In fact I'm hoping the thing may come on again. At the moment Camilla is thrashing at her work and pretends she can think of nothing else; she is also highly cynical about all men, which generally means that the weathercock is due to veer to a steady quarter. If she marries," added Lady Dering, delicately touching one of the dresser shelves, "it will probably be without much enthusiasm, and her happiness will come slowly. But one day she will find it is the real thing."

"I'm sure you are right 'm," Mabel agreed, conventionally and quickly. Lady Dering was absorbed in the dresser and she had a chance to consider her sharply. What did she know about that daughter of hers? A lot, Mabel 'ud lay-a-penny, maybe everything. All this talk had been—not bluff, but a build-up to protect the girl and show her off to advantage. The pat way it had come out, all ready at less than a hint—Mabel gazed hard and breathed to match. Something in Lady Dering's bearing and deliberate little movements gave her a nip, a sort of warning. She softened, suddenly. Well, after all, wasn't it natural? Lady Dering, if she'd known everything must have suffered like a mother would, stuck down at Combe, not able to put out a hand or put in a word to stop her girl playing wild games. As likely as not Camilla had been led away like others. There were some—no need to mention names even in one's thoughts—who had a lot to answer for. And if what Lady D. said was true—no reason why it shouldn't be—a real nice man wanted to marry her. That being so, somebody else might think of marrying her too. No one would have a chance against Paddy. He might come to care for her in the proper way, and of course she'd fall over herself for him.

Yes, Camilla might do for Paddy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT wasn't as fine an October as last year but there were some nice days although Mabel didn't trust them. No leaving Master Garth about in the garden for her. She'd got a new light baby-car after waiting all these months and it did splendid for taking him out on walks when the old pram would have been far too heavy to push up and down the Barleigh Road. Every day, even when it rained a little, they went out together, a telescoped royal procession stopping at Seven, Bell, for a word with the girls, down to the village to shop and bestow bows, where bows were merited. Past the Vicarage (the Vicar's wife, a nice woman, always admired Garth so much, and, twice, had come to tea at the bungalow), back up again with a nod at Liz Marsh's window to show one couldn't stop for everybody. It was an excursion Mabel never failed to relish but she enjoyed the quiet walks up the Barleigh Road into the country too. Of course she couldn't leave the baby-car or bump it over the fields so her blackberrying this year was confined to what she could pick in the roadside hedges. The height she was she could reach clusters no one else could get near and one afternoon that had started with a drizzle and then cleared she filled quite a large basket in no time. There was a nice little contraption on the baby-car which carried things safely out of the occupant's reach. She fixed the basket securely and then hesitated for a minute. She had meant to go on, really, over the top of the hill to see if there was any sign of huts popping up. Doll had gossiped with someone who said a whole field top of Barleigh Road was to be filled with them. Doll was getting a lot too fond of gossip these days, be a good thing to have her up to the bungalow for a week-end and give her a word. She and Het by themselves needed an eye and a hand kept on them. Mabel's eye raked some smoke rising against the dampness in the air; it marked Bell, and probably Seven, where no fire should be burning at this time of day. Her hand tightened on the bar of the baby-car and she decided to go home instead of bothering about huts. She and Garth would have tea early, maybe with a bit of toast as she'd have plenty of time to make it. And he could have half an hour extra in the drawing-sitting-room with those bricks the Vicar's wife had given him and he was so fond of. "Can't you, my precious?"

Garth was too busy with a bunch of twigs she had picked and peeled for him to answer. She hesitated a moment, savouring the

delicacy of fulfilled love, setting it against the pompous satisfaction of a position established beyond nudge or doubt. Miss Barter of Garth, Barleigh Road, looked down on Ringerton, released the faintest of sniffs and then started towards home. She gave the baby-car a special push which twirled it in a way that always made Garth squeal with delight and turned the bend of the road before the bungalow to see two people, a young man and a girl, walking towards her.

"Paddy!" she cried. But it was Tess who looked up at her. "Paddy?" she shouted again, rocking the baby-car wildly as she hurried towards them. "It's all right, precious," she assured the baby, breathlessly. "Here's your own daddy. Paddy, my dear?" Paddy jerked his head up and looked at her. She stopped with the baby-car between them, let the car take its chance while she held out both hands. "Oh, son . . . come round and give me a kiss. Well, Tess, it's nice to see you, too, even if 'tis with no warning."

"Yes, Auntie."

"Bartie, old dear?"

"Same as ever, yes. I suppose you two met in the village and Tess caught herself a lift up?"

"Tess drove down with me from Town," said Paddy, quietly. Mabel grabbed the handle of the baby-car.

"Then you'll both be wanting tea. Lucky I've enough in the house. Are you staying the night, Paddy?"

"No, Bartie. I'm driving Tess on to Templeford. We just stopped to see you on our way."

"What's all this?" demanded Mabel.

"We've come to tell, you, Bartie. Shall we go back to the house?" Paddy was standing there, very straight, his head up, his hands clenching at his sides. The baby shouted and he took no notice.

Mabel exploded.

"You'd better get on with your telling right away."

"Tess and I are engaged to be married. We met in London last spring and we've been going around ever since. We couldn't talk about it—or write. Tess said you'd never understand."

"What call did you have to say that, Tess?" Mabel wheeled on her to glare the question. Tess's head was bent; it had gone down while Paddy was speaking. Now she raised it and met Mabel's glare.

"How could you understand, Auntie?" she said, gently. "I know how shocked you'd be and when a person is shocked she's

. . . sort of frightened and can't listen except to what she knows to begin with. You couldn't know about me loving Paddy and—mattering to him.”

“Well, upon my word . . .” it failed Mabel. Everything she had ever said or done failed her. Here was something right outside all her experience and yet, in a terrifying way, familiar. Tess, Dick's daughter, her own niece, had caught Captain Howland. Gulping wildly now she stared at them. They were both wearing the same expression and they hadn't needed to look at each other to match it. They were desperately decided, been careful not to make a sign until they had it sealed and settled. Nobody could do nothing although perhaps if she'd burst out the first minute instead of asking Tess a question that gave her a lead it might have blasted the rock a bit, let Paddy, at any rate, be someone else to get a shock.

“I'm terribly sorry, Auntie.” Tess's voice was even more gentle than before but it had strength in it, of purpose, of exaltation, of love. Mabel jerked her head so that she need not look at the flush leaving the girl's face small and pale.

“Not much use saying you are sorry.”

“I'm not saying so anyway, Bartie,” announced Paddy. And laughed.

Mabel jumped so that she let go of the baby-car handle again, the car began to move and bumped into Paddy's legs. She hadn't heard Paddy laugh—since when? Only kind of chuckling barks when he was with Percy, never the real thing. He hadn't been happy—might be not since his dad died. Percy had never made him happy. Got hold of him too, and frightened him . . . memories, shame-faced even after all these years, of things Mrs. Howland had said when she was excited or in one of her silly moods, came back in an awkward flood to Mabel. Oh, yes, there were plenty of tricks brazen young women could play. Tess wasn't brazen. She was a lorry driver's daughter, she wasn't a lady but . . .

She was good. Well brought-up, with principles and nice feelings. Clever. Tender and kind by instinct, never rough of manner or thought. And there wasn't no doubt about her loving Paddy. At the sound of his laughter she hadn't jumped but turned to gaze at him, the colour coming back to her face, her eyes shining, her breath quick. All she wanted was for Paddy to be happy and, thought Mabel, dimly apprehending, the pure in heart are blessed. Maybe no one else would suit him so well, not after all he'd gone through. Until this minute she hadn't realized what it might have done to him. He wasn't just like any other young man any more.

Then suddenly anger blazed through her. Why should Paddy be set aside as marked? Was it Tess's doing? She opened her mouth to let fly and savage the girl and as she did so she caught the warning in Paddy's hot eyes.

For a moment she thought of asking the boy what he was looking at her like that for, then she went cold all over understanding her danger. Paddy belonged to Tess now. And in this moment of tension anything might happen. If she said something he couldn't forgive he wouldn't forget it, she might easily lose him for ever. She returned his look with one of immense reproach and turned to Tess again.

"It's done me good to hear Paddy laugh. Quite true, Tess, you certainly have given me a shock. We've all got our feelings although some, it seems, are very different to others. I only hope you aren't thinking of getting married before Paddy's year is out. I hope you'll recollect yourselves and promise me that."

"Yes, Auntie, I think we can, though Paddy would like everything settled before Christmas. He has heard of a little flat near Brook Green, not too small, really, there'll be room . . ." Tess broke off. She needn't have done for what she was going to say hung in the air between them, almost visible over the baby's head. Tess would be Paddy's wife and Garth's step-mother. In the natural order of things she'd take the child and make a home for him with his father.

"What—you going to do about the bungalow?" demanded Mabel hoarsely, "you'll need all the money you can get. It'll fetch a good price."

Tess was going to answer but Paddy took over from her. Mabel saw him touch her hand to remind her he could protect her.

"We were going to consult you, Bartie. Yes, of course money will be rather a difficulty for a bit and, if you don't really mind, we thought perhaps we might let the place as it is on a yearly tenancy. Then we reserve the chance to come back to it when we can afford to. Of course I hope I'm going to make a decent income one of these days."

"Is Tess going on working?"

"Not at the Ministry. She may try some half-time job, but I don't want her to and she probably won't."

No, she's going to have you and Garth and her own little home and the bungalow in a year or two. In the silence she did not attempt to break to reassure them Mabel summed up, bitterly. Tess was getting herself all a woman wanted. Taking it from me, thought

Mabel, sorely, and shivered indignantly at the first prick of self-reproach.

"Look here, Bartie," exclaimed Paddy, desperately. "We aren't really utterly selfish. We can manage someway . . . if you'd like to stay in the bungalow and nurse it for us—if you'd like to keep Garth for a time——"

"Paddy, look at the legs of your trousers, where the mud from the car wheels has come off on them. Don't rub them like that, you'll rub it in. Stay in the bungalow and look after your son when you are marrying a wife whose duty 'tis to do it? I dunno what you're thinking of to suggest such nonsense. Don't let me hear you talking rubbish again. You and Tess are to be man and wife and your responsibilities are your own funeral. I can but hope Tess'll remember how she was brought up to be sensible and won't get her head turned but put you and the Little Precious first every-way. She has got a lot to learn and no one can help her but by standing aside. I won't say I'm pleased about all this, but worse things have worked out quite well. I speak as I find and always shall. Now, Tess, you can wheel Master Garth home. Be careful not to bump him on the rough bit of road. We're coming to it. Look where you are going. Paddy, you can walk behind with me."

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She made the final gesture of going out to the gate after tea to wave them away on their journey to Templeford. Whatever poor young Dick and Jean would say to them, she wondered. Jean might come to be perky about such a marriage for her girl, but Dick, if she knew him, never. Awkward he'd feel from first to last, as like as not he'd always bring out "Captain Howland".

Had Het and Doll seen the car go past Bell? There'd be some nice traffic with Het, anybody could lay-a-penny on that. One minute she'd be smirking and the next looking down her nose, and what she'd say in the village when she started talking . . .

"Dunno how I'm going to manage Doll neither." For a moment Mabel felt helpless, bewildered, old. The hand she had been waving dropped on to the gate and she passed the other over her eyes, wearily. All she felt fit for was a good cry.

So thoroughly dumbfounded that she heard footsteps and didn't let go the gate and turn round quick enough. The footsteps were slow and heavy, she'd plenty of time, but there it was. Round the bend, looking as though the foul old pipe he was smoking brought

the thickening dusk up the road, came Stan Hawkins. His coat-
fronts stuck out quite stiff, flapping as if they might clap together,
his cap was pushed to the back of his head; directly he saw her
he began to blink enough to make anyone dizzy, there never had
been such a figure of fun. And she was not in the mood for fun.

"Well, Mabel?" he inquired, and came to a standstill.

"Well yourself?" she snapped, furious to feel her lips trembling.
Still more furious to realize that she was glad of anybody to speak
to, even that loon, Stan Hawkins.

"How are you getting on, Mabel?" he asked, soberly, and was
obviously prepared to wait until he got an answer. Aggravating
as ever. Mabel rubbed her eyes pettishly. Just let him stop there
a minute and she'd be ready to give him a look he wouldn't forget
in a hurry. But as she rubbed an incredible thing happened. On
the hand with which she was still holding the gate she felt some-
thing warm, heavy as a stone, hard and horny to scratching point.
Stan had put his hand over hers and was pressing it.

"What'n the world? . . ."

"There 'tis," said Stan Hawkins, with scriptural simplicity.
You needn't say nothing, Mabe, because I know it all. You can
rough the life out of me but maybe you're not so ready for that
as you was. One way or another we all come to it."

"Come to what, I'd like to know?"

"Feeling lonely. You here, quite the lady. Me there, just like
allers was only getting on and no better for the trouble it gives
me. I'm not your equal, Mabe, never could be, and I've no more
to offer than I ever had. But getting up along is the same for all
of us, makes us look round and wonder if we can't find something
to hold to that won't change. I couldn't change if I tried, dear.
That's all I've got to say, Mabe. I'm not asking anything."

"I should think not indeed."

"My best thanks to you for hearkening to me. Mabe, you ain't
looking none too hearty. If I call again to make my inquiries, will
you see me?"

He didn't wait for an answer but carefully removed his hand
from hers, saluted by pushing his cap still farther back on his
head and turned to go home again.

So he'd brought himself up to pop the question, no less. Did
ever anybody know the likes of such a fellow? If he was simple,
he was crafty. With his asking nothing one minute and everything
the next. And how had he come to fancy she wasn't doing as fine
as everybody had cause to believe? Not through gossip, that was

one thing certain. Stan never had and never would, whisper or listen to a word. She'd stake her life on it. He was a reliable fellow, no denying that. And a good worker, well thought of in Ringerton and all around, one of its most respected families. Not really old, neither, and if a woman took him in hand she could smarten him up. Nobody who knew him would sneer at any woman for marrying him, and that nice little cottage was his own. Now all this had happened could she bring herself to? . . ."

Goodness, there was Garth shouting for her. Clear as anything he said "Bartie". Her Little Precious, and she was going to lose him. . . .

No, she wasn't. Master Garth would always need her, now, maybe, more than ever. Tess would have children of her own. Someone must watch to see Paddy's own son got his deserts and wasn't never put upon. Not but what Tess's children should be dear little things, and her own nephews and nieces. Queer to think they'd be Paddy's too. But Master Garth must come first.

"Coming, lovey," shouted Mabel. She stood still a minute, however, straightening her back. The dusk was as good as darkness now but clear in front of her she saw the outline and colour of the future taking shape. She tasted the relish of a delicious jealousy, subtly compounded of championship of Garth and secret delight in Tess's babies. Not to mention the pull she'd get over Tess and Paddy. They'd hardly be able to afford a proper Nanny for some time so Bartie'd always be the person to turn to. Whether they liked it or not. . . . Oh, she'd have her hands full.

Absently Mabel removed the one on the gate and rubbed it under the other in case Stan Hawkins had left any of his grub on it. Then "Coming, my duck," she called and walked swiftly with an elegance she had never surpassed, into the house.

THE END

